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Oblique Agency: Mapping the Globalised Workflows of Television Dubbing and Their Impact on Practitioners

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Abstract

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of how increasingly globalised infrastructures, marked by industry expansion, consolidation, and the impact of streamers, affect the workflows and practices within local dubbing industries. Informed by extensive, original interviews with managerial and creative dubbing practitioners, and industry fieldwork observations since 2017, the article is located within a post-Bourdieuian framework, exploring what significant change for the field and its habitus has meant for agency. Having identified a persistent lack of engagement with the dubbing of television in existing scholarship across several disciplines, the article considers how dubbing practitioners negotiate a wider industrial push towards more streamlining, standardisation, and more attendance to issues concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion. Here, the article offers the notion of oblique agency, to capture how creative agency is moved away from local creative practitioners, through more managerial oversight, prescriptive guidance and tools, and feedback cultures shaped by corporate agendas. Simultaneously, some agency is left to these practitioners, most acutely felt in the case of dubbing contemporary television (marked by narrative and tonal complexity), due to a lack of investment and recognition of dubbing as inherently creative. The article takes care to explore the complexities of these dynamics, especially a pronounced heterogeneity of views, including simultaneous criticism and enjoyment by creative practitioners, as well as a considerable gap between their perspectives and those of managerial practitioners. In this way, the article seeks to make a much-needed contribution to nuanced engagement with dubbing infrastructures and working practices.

Keywords

audiovisual translation; creative agency; dubbing; streamers; televisuality; production cultures

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1. Introduction

This article examines the globalised workflows of television dubbing, focusing on the complex dynamics these developing structures have created for dubbing practitioners. Moving away from limited and often negative references to dubbing in past scholarship, we argue for a deeper, practice-informed understanding of dubbing, especially to be better able to grasp how it intersects with televisuality. Through fieldwork observations and original interviews, we map recent industry shifts towards expansion and consolidation, marked by the rising dominance of streamers, and how both managerial and creative dubbing practitioners navigate this evolving field. As globalised drives towards more efficiency and standardisation intersect with local expertise and working practices, the article offers the notion of "oblique agency" to help capture the dynamics marking the use of creative agency within global dubbing practices, especially in relation to television.

2. Reviewing the Literature

Scholarship on television has not paid much attention to dubbing. This holds true even for research where one might not unreasonably hope—if not expect—to see at least some engagement. While it may risk coming across as churlish to cite any specific examples of this widespread neglect, we will do so now, to help dramatise its breadth and depth: Dubbing gets largely overlooked within work on the global dimensions of television (a half-dozen or so mentions in Parks & Kumar, 2003); the European television industries (one reference in Iosifidis et al., 2005); the global television marketplace (a few quick mentions in Havens, 2006); transnational European television drama (two references in Bondebjerg et al., 2017); Netflix and the geography of digital distribution (a couple of quick mentions in Lobato, 2019); and television drama as storyteller for the global village (one reference in Ríos & Lin, 2021). These are valuable pieces of research by esteemed scholars, who are at least paying more than zero attention, but…not very much more.

There are, thankfully, some exceptions: Works such as Caron (2007), Barra (2013), Adamou and Knox (2011), Knox and Schwind (2019), and Cornelio-Marí (2022) explore dubbed television in more depth. There is a range of critical projects to be noticed: Appearing in an important anthology of television studies, but authored by a historian, Caron (2007) links dubbing to notions of betrayal, limitation, falsification, and compromise, but simultaneously finds choices in dubbed television that she considers "imaginative" (p. 160) and "wonderful" (p. 165). She argues that the French dubbing of *Star Trek* "completely transform[s] the original text" (p. 157) at times, but also that the French version "is not quite the same show as *TOS*" (p. 151). There is less of this uncertainty in the work by Adamou and Knox (2011) and Knox and Schwind (2019), who—in resonance with Barra (2013)—argue for the transformative impact of dubbing. They are also keen to move the conceptual groundwork beyond notions of loss, betrayal, and ventriloquism. Cornelio-Marí (2022) undertakes valuable audience research, unpicking the complexity of the ways in which viewers access programming in different versions and contexts. As valuable as these discussions are, they tend to be short, and methodologically speaking, only Barra (2013) is grounded in practitioner interviews and fieldwork observation (Esser et al.'s [2016] edited collection *Media Across Borders* deserves a mention for giving as much space as it does to TV dubbing, but that responsibility is carried by audiovisual translation scholars).

If we cast a quick look outside of scholarship on television: Film scholars have, comparatively speaking, engaged a little more with dubbing—not surprising, given that their discipline has a longer history and larger

"cohort size"—but here, understandably, the interest has been in dubbed films. In their influential work, which conceptualises dubbing in general as "a kind of cultural violence and dislocation" (p. 52), Shochat and Stam (1985) refer to dubbed television in Brazil such as "Kojak, Colombo [sic] and Starsky and Hutch…[as] a kind of monstrosity" (p. 52). In her discussion of voice dubbing as a form of cultural ventriloquism, Ascheid refers to television, both to praise a successful instance of dubbing (*Starsky & Hutch*) and to frame the fact of German television broadcasting foreign films on two audio channels as "German television…acknowledg[ing] the limitations of dubbing" (Ascheid, 1997, p. 34). Nornes is mostly concerned with the dubbing of Japanese films, noting that: "Television dubbing was always a step or two behind the process for film because of the newness of the technology, the most significant difference being the fact that all broadcasts were live in the first few years" (Nornes, 2007, p. 202).

Whether or not there is something of a pattern here to be detected, of dubbed television being something of a bad object—just as television itself has been far too often in film scholarship—or an unstable (cultural) entity (T. Miller, 2010, p. 154), readers may come to their own conclusions; but we do not think we can rule it out comfortably. Showing that it is possible to do without such tendencies, Dwyer, in her thoughtful revaluation of screen translation, acknowledges that such translation "both *grounds* and *mobilises* screen culture" (Dwyer, 2017, p. 9), but tends to be more focused on film and subtitling than dubbing and television. Overall, however, film scholarship has also shown rather limited engagement with practitioner interviews or fieldwork observation.

Audiovisual translation studies has been using television programmes as case studies (e.g., Ferrari, 2010), but understandably with the methodologies and concerns that preoccupy this discipline, not those of television studies. Chiaro sums it up well with her comment that "research predominantly consists of countless case studies that focus on the comparison of translational choices in specific language pairs" (Chiaro, 2021, p. A124). Chaume's (2004) influential work has argued for research on audiovisual translation to be in closer engagement with both translation studies and film studies and has generally paid more attention to television than television scholarship. His important monograph on dubbing noted:

> Although the degree of perfection is not as high as that demanded by the big screen, television series do include the three synchronization types in all their forms. Television series offer a magnificent apprenticeship for those interested in this area of translation, as all types of synchronization have to be applied, but the final result allows for a greater margin of error than in the dubbing of a film. (Chaume, 2012, p. 76)

Bosseaux uses *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* as the case study for her monograph, curiously titled *Dubbing, Film and Performance: Uncanny Encounters*, noting that: "For the sake of simplicity, the word 'film' will hereafter be used to talk about both films and television series" (Bosseaux, 2015, p. 7, note 1). The book draws on scholarship on television only via publications focused on its chosen genre programme and reserves its attention for film mise-en-scene scholarship in order to produce detailed analyses that may be of great interest to television scholars, but who might not easily discover the book due to its framing.

Overall, while the above picture is inevitably painted with broad brushstrokes, we hope it has captured and conveyed the impact of various research paradigms and disciplinary trajectories: There is far from enough scholarship on dubbed television, especially scholarship which moves beyond linking dubbed television to

negativity in some form; which instead draws on the methodological strengths and core debates of television studies; and which is underpinned by insights from practitioner perspectives and industry fieldwork observations. This needed scholarship would be able to engage in both depth and nuance with what may be specific to the dubbing of television, and how dubbing and televisuality may intersect. This article will take a step in that direction. To do so is timely, because dubbing infrastructures and workflows have been undergoing significant change, becoming more globalised in recent years.

3. Methodology and Critical Framework

Given this significant change, this article will examine the intersection of televisuality and dubbing in two main ways: It will map out and reflect on the current industrial infrastructures and workflows for dubbing and then explore how this developing context is affecting dubbing practitioners, including in terms of their perception of and engagement with televisuality. Some of this mapping has been done before (e.g., Barra, 2009; Chaume, 2012; Dries, 1995; Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2006; Troester, 2002; Whitman-Linsen, 1992), but this is inevitably out-of-date in certain aspects and tends to pay more attention to the workflow at the point when the dubbing scriptwriting commences, less to the overall industrial structure within which this creative labour takes place. Some of this work also shows tendencies towards being descriptive or light on reflection, and/or pays little attention to how the developing infrastructure impacts practitioners (the latter is the case for e.g., Sánchez-Mompeán, 2021).

In terms of its methodological approach, it is important for our research that it is grounded in an extensive series of original interviews as well as fieldwork observation, with the present article informed throughout by the depth and breadth of first-hand original insights gathered over a sustained period of time (Bruun & Frandsen, 2022). Our in-person and online visits to dubbing studios and other spaces in Germany and France since 2017 include observing dubbing recording and scriptwriting sessions, have frequently overlapped with formal and informal interviews, and have allowed us to build trust with and expand our contacts. The 13 practitioners we have interviewed in 2024 alone include staff from several streaming services as well as dubbing scriptwriters, directors, and actors from Germany and France, some of whom hold leadership positions in advocacy associations (Union Professionnelle des Auteurs de Doublage, the French guild of professional dubbing writers; Bundesverband Synchronregie und Dialogbuch, the German federal association for dubbing directors and scriptwriters, and the German guild *Synchronverband*). Our practitioners are located in Europe (although their work is complexly transnational and they have considerable knowledge of other markets between them), and there are inevitably nuances for each national context that we cannot cover within the scope of this article. However, we have aimed to include industry practitioners whose work is located at various points of proximity to the dubbing studio (with a final interview split of 40% managerial and 60% creative professionals), to be able to explore current industry structures and how they may be affecting practitioners "on the ground." Guided by Mills' (2008) reflections on the importance of ethical considerations *after* the interview, we will not provide further details about the identities of those we spoke to. In this way, we have not only been able to secure the interviews with these "exclusive informants" (Bruun, 2016) who have considerable professional insight, but can present our research without having to be concerned about how *our* analysis might be perceived by the companies that employ *them*. This is pressing given this article's focus on contemporary industrial developments and working practices, which are marked by strong concerns about dubbing companies and streamers to manage reputational risk.

In terms of our conceptual terrain, we will reflect on the insights provided through our grounding in professional practice via the lens of televisuality, a term coined by Caldwell (1995) and since understood as a means for comprehending television as a distinct and continually evolving medium. We will engage with televisuality in terms of both industrial structure and (post) production process as well as storytelling and style. Whilst we do not have space to undertake close textual analysis of dubbed television as such, we will explore how practitioners approach the dubbing of television. Here, we will pay attention to dubbing and televisuality both in terms of long-form television marked by narrative complexity (Mittell, 2006) and intertextuality—building on Wehn (1996) and Barra (2013)—as well as style (especially directing and performance, which have hitherto not received sufficient scholarly attention). Our analysis will be located in a post-Bourdieuian framework that is informed by Born's (2000, 2002, 2003, 2010) valuable work, specifically in relation to field, habitus, and agency. We wish to contribute to this framework through a concept that emerged strongly in our research, namely oblique agency: a dynamic whereby agency is both moved away from those who have previously held it, and also at certain points left with them. As we will discuss, those points concern the dubbing of television most acutely, speaking to Bourdieu's understanding of agency, noted by Born (2010, p. 181), as "result[ing] from the improvisatory nature of practice as it is informed by the habitus and meets the conditions of the field."

4. Mapping Currents: The Development of the Globalised Dubbing Infrastructure

We will now begin to explore the current main industrial structures and workflows of the global dubbing industry and to what extent they have been interlocking and interfering with previously established local structures. As all our informants have confirmed to us, the core activities have not fundamentally changed since the advent of dubbing in the last century. Fundamentally, any exported programme (or film) is localised through "national mediation" (Barra, 2013, p. 101) after it has been commissioned and distributed through a global marketplace (Havens, 2006). After the bidding stage, once international production/distribution companies, national broadcasters, or streaming platforms have commissioned a dubbing company, the actual dubbing production is executed. The original content is localised by translators, dialogue authors, "detectors" (in France, who prepare the dubbing script for the recording), directors, dubbing actors, "cutters" (in Germany, who edit and sync the recorded performance), and sound editors and mixers. The quality assurance and release of the content is executed and organised by the local dubbing production companies, broadcasters, international corporations, and distribution platforms.

As the references to "detectors" and "cutters" suggest, the actual process of dubbing and the resulting work chain is highly influenced by the specific techniques employed in individual contexts. For instance, the take-based approach in Germany, Italy, and Spain (in which the dubbing script is divided into short takes that are separately performed/recorded) differs notably from the *bande rythmo* approach in France and Canada (where the dubbing script is included in a scrolling stripe). The differences, challenges, and possibilities of these respective techniques are not the subject of this study, but will be explored in more detail elsewhere (Knox & Schwind, in press). Generally, a dubbing work chain is based on a rough translation, a resulting dialogue script used in the recording studio, and a textual and audiovisual organisation of the original content into takes, followed by the recorded performance. The content goes through different phases of editing, including adjusting and mixing the dubbed voices, compiling original sound such as atmospheres and music with re-recorded sounds, and finalising the overall sound mix.

Importantly, there is a sense of continuity in that the essential craft of dubbing at its core has not changed, even though it has been meaningfully affected by the development of technology (especially the internet and digital technology). There is also a strong sense of consensus, confirmed by all of our informants, that a successful dub meets two criteria: (a) the "invisibility" of the localisation, which means that a local audience is not supposed to be aware of the dubbing; and (b) the consistency and coherence of the original content's tone. We will return to the second criterion, which is particularly an issue concerning televisuality; for now, we can ascertain that the current practice and workflow of dubbing practitioners are characterised by a certain amount of co-creational labour demanding both an understanding of creative/artistic and managerial/organisational practices by all contributors across the work chain and globalised infrastructure.

Whilst there is continuity and consensus, dubbing industries across the globe have also undergone a fundamental change from the 2010s onwards, and most acutely experienced by practitioners since roughly 2020. Key factors are the screen production boom in the 2010s (following the move into original content commissioning by the streamers), a global push towards dubbing as audiovisual translation method (heralded by Netflix, which has been keen to capitalise on its international catalogue across its markets; see Sánchez-Mompeán, 2021), and subsequent international expansion and consolidation of the dubbing industry (with key players keen to secure their profile and leadership position within a fragmenting landscape). The shifts towards expansion and consolidation have facilitated the need for more standardised working practices, efficient workflows and more strategic value creation dynamics across the entire work chain of a dubbing production, with significant developments concerning the intersections of global and local structures. As such, these dynamics have resulted in an evolution of the agency that practitioners experience, which we will address further in Section 5.

To provide more specificity for this changed landscape is only a problem in terms of which examples *not* to pick from the array of mergers and acquisitions. At one point Singapore-based audiovisual translation company Iyuno has developed into a "super agency" due to its global reach and extensive capabilities following a series of business (trans)actions, including merging with Swedish BTI Studios in 2019 and acquiring SDI Media in 2021; with a current network of 67 offices across 35 countries (the company made headline news in August 2024 following a digital security breach that saw Netflix content leaked online). VSI Group has similarly established strategic footholds in markets across Europe, Asia, and the Americas, with ambitions for the Latin American market signalled by its majority acquisition of São Paulo-based Vox Mundi in 2021. Comparatively modest in comparison is the global footprint of the Dubbing Brothers, who, originally from France and having purchased companies including Eurotroll, have a strong focus on Europe. In Germany, Dubbing Brothers' expansion has resulted in the acquisition of the renowned FFS Film & Fernsehen Synchron GmbH, a controversial move that met significant criticism from the local dubbing industry. As several informants confirmed, the merger was seen as "invasive" and "threatening," particularly because of attempts by the company and their newly acquired affiliates to introduce *bande rythmo*, the standard practice in France, to the German market.

With such pronounced expansion and consolidation, international streaming platforms in particular have been successful in interlocking with national markets, through networks of suppliers, referred to as vendors, often based on local structures consisting of companies and dubbing consultants with relevant previous experience and active local networks. For example, Amazon Prime Video runs a global Prime Preferred Vendor Program, about which it claims: "To ensure high quality service and performance, admittance to the

program will require fulfillment vendors to go through the same rigorous evaluation process and must already meet and/or exceed the KPIs stated in the program conditions" (Amazon Prime Video, n.d.). With its "management consultancy, assertive style" (Born, 2003, p. 71), the rhetoric here implies a top-down approach to quality control much more than transfer of knowledge developed within local structures and practices. On an even larger scale, Netflix has been operating the worldwide Netflix Post Partner Program (known as NP3) since 2018. Netflix (n.d.-a) is currently working with approximately 170 (what it publicly frames as) "localization partners." To be included in such programmes, dubbing studios need to enter an application process which can include test or trial productions (partly to demonstrate that applicants can meet the stringent technical delivery requirements), as well as being recommended from within pre-existing industry structures; and final approval rests with the streamers' global research strategy teams.

Structurally invasive practices such as these programmes serve a multi-pronged strategy for the streamers, helping their aims of achieving scalability, efficiency, and the establishment of a more standardised workflow and feedback loop in relation to quality assurance/control. Two particular aspects are worth highlighting in relation to the push for more standardisation and streamlined workflows: firstly, most (if not all) streamers have introduced guidelines for their (key) titles. These guidelines—or "creative letters," as they are known within the industry—originate in the country in which the content is originally commissioned and are usually compiled by a title manager. They include general descriptions of main characters and suggestions that might inform the casting of the voice actors, as well as instructions, for instance, whether original songs should be dubbed, and notes for how to handle the transfer of specific cultural references. Secondly, streamers have introduced online interfaces to facilitate and manage the translation of terms, which function as centralised databases with real-time updates. The most high-profile of these is Netflix's Key Names and Phrases (KNP) tool, which utilises machine learning technology that analyses scripts and undertakes keyword tagging and extraction. Both these guidelines and online databases have been noted by Sánchez-Mompeán (2021), who drew extensively from information publicly available online, but the additional insights lent by our informants underline the irreplaceable value of engaging with practitioners working "at the coalface": The guidelines suggest a more detailed awareness of televisual aspects of TV content, but, as we will discuss, they are not necessarily perceived as fundamentally helpful tools by the creative practitioners themselves. The online databases imply, at least in terms of their public framing, a space for global exchange and discussion (Netflix, n.d.-b), and creative practitioners find the provided glossaries and consistency sheets helpful and time-saving. However, instead of supporting two-way exchange, annotations are usually focused on forestalling possible objections to, or providing alternative options for, the creative practitioners' choices, which, in turn, directly affects their creative agency and ownership of the dubbing process.

The push for more standardisation and streamlining that goes hand-in-hand with the pronounced expansion and consolidation of the globalising dubbing infrastructures is complexly intertwined with advancements in digital technology, which started impacting the dubbing industry in the 1990s, but has made further significant inroads in recent years. All our informants engage with different software programmes and cloud-based collaboration platforms: these include tools for project and work-flow management, which aid task allocation/automation and real-time progress tracking across departments, as well as facilitate content management, via version control, real-time feedback sharing, video timeline annotations, and customisable permissions. Translation management systems, such as MemoQ, offer the handling of "translation memories" (databases that store previously translated units of text) and built-in quality control checks, and thus come

with a correspondingly high price tag. Dubbing-specific localisation software that syncs translations to time-coded audio, such as VoiceQ (which can be integrated with e.g., MemoQ), is also making significant inroads warranting future in-depth investigation.

Interestingly, what emerged in our interviews is a shared perception that the dubbing industry was particularly well-equipped to handle the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic and that inherent structures were not fundamentally challenged (especially compared to other industries). For instance, cloud-based software that enables remote recording, editing, mixing, and distribution, was partly already in use and did not require a particular paradigm shift or change in habitus for the creative labourers of the dubbing industry. Indeed, several informants noted that the pandemic had an arguably positive lasting impact on the German dubbing industry, in that it helped shift working practices away from using printed scripts. It seems to us that the increasing push towards globalisation, and with it accelerated timelines, creates major inroads for AI and other types of digital technologies that deserve attention which exceeds the confines of this article (see e.g., Orrego-Carmona, 2024).

Marked by such expansion, consolidation, and the impact of streamers, the field has seen the establishment of a more overarching and interwoven industrial infrastructure that continues to be developed by a number of leading streamers, production companies, studios, and dubbing companies. One of our managerial informants described this strategically implemented process as based on the necessity of "bridging global standards practices with local practices." Significantly, traditional (national) broadcasting companies have been somewhat sidelined in their prominence by a variety of newly created organisational/managerial positions and functions, diagnostic and symptomatic of a still developing approach to the specificities of the dubbing work chain. Introduced by the streamers, these strategically created mediating positions have job titles such as "language production managers" or "dubbing managers." The managers we spoke to are of the nationality of the localised market they work in, have previous experience of working in the field of linguistic and/or audiovisual translation (including television dubbing), and have an educational background within the humanities. These managerial positions provide a nexus linking the global corporate headquarters and the local industry structures, facilitating information flow and knowledge exchange. They initiate and oversee the entire dubbing work chain, including the final quality control. The establishment of these positions illustrates that the profile of creative agency has been shifting over time and a strategic decision that creatives have to be managed, supported, and contained in quite particular ways in the age of more globalised workflows.

There is a detectable difference between established and emergent dubbing industries when it comes to such managerial positions: in September 2024, Dubbing Brothers USA was looking for a project manager for Japanese–English dubbing, who would, according to the job ad (which we were alerted to via one of our informants), "coordinate all the steps to complete an English dub," act as "the central point of contact between the client and all parties involved" and be responsible for managing the schedule and budget. The person specification emphasised that the candidate "must speak fluent Japanese" but made experience in the dubbing industry optional. This contrasts quite sharply with the job advertisement by VSI Berlin for a project manager in March 2022, which was looking for someone to take on a very similar set of responsibilities, but here, the person specification made it clear that a "higher education background or training with a linguistic/media studies focus as well as relevant professional experience" were required. This speaks to a concern felt by experienced practitioners within the dubbing industry that with the screen

production boom and attendant dubbing boom that emerged in the 2010s, the field overall became less consistently grounded in direct professional expertise.

With deep experience in their industries, the managers we interviewed described a typical work week as consisting of multifaceted activities—a "colourful bouquet" as one informant put it. This includes operational work such as commissioning a dubbing studio, being involved in the casting of voice actors and directors, and occasional visits to the studios to check in on the actual recording. All of them very much describe themselves as "contact persons" for the creative personnel involved with individual productions (or "titles" as is the industry term), available for queries and questions. Their work also has a strategic dimension, such as being involved in recruitment activities (e.g., workshops for scriptwriters in training) and liaising with their counterparts in other countries. The latter includes measures such as knowledge exchange events to discuss the specifics of how the dubbing of specific titles is handled and sharing best practices. Our managerial informants agreed that their work carried a certain "ambassadorial function," especially concerning awareness campaigns for diversity and inclusion, within the local industry structure as well as across borders and higher up the industrial hierarchy.

Remarkably, the managers responsible for the content in various regions usually operate alone or in very small teams. A "bigger team" we encountered consists of a person responsible for German content to be dubbed into other languages, another person for international content to be dubbed into German, plus a manager overseeing both. Here, our managerial informants' claim of consistent availability as "creative sparring partners" for dubbing scriptwriters and directors strikes us as ambitious, if not questionable, given the sheer volume of productions in circulation at any given time and the manifold activities and multifaceted involvement required by their positions. As we will show, there is a discrepancy between this perspective and that of the creative practitioners we interviewed, which, in turn, informs the lived experience of agency for the creative practitioners.

Overall, the infrastructure of television (and film) dubbing worldwide has clearly been undergoing a period of significant transition, becoming more transnational, consolidated, and standardised in its approach to managing the practice of dubbing. Section 5 will examine how this is a dichotomous process, where previously established local/national structures, endowed with relatively high degrees of cultural capital, and traditional practices (in particular in "mature" sectors such as Germany, France, and Italy) have been wrestling with the complexities of this process. This includes the need to reconcile organisational and technical innovations introduced by new clients—both streamers and global dubbing companies—with long-standing tendencies of scepticism and resistance to change. Here, notions of individual creative agency as well as a more collectively perceived autonomy of a very specific branch of cultural labourers are constantly negotiated. We will examine and reflect on the repercussions of these processes, which will lead us to offer the notion of oblique agency.

5. Impact on Practitioners: Moving Towards Oblique Agency

The significant shift towards implementing more globally standardised dubbing working practices around the year 2015, with a clear prerogative to establish more formalised measures of quality control, was understood by several creative practitioners we spoke to as being linked to Netflix's push into English language dubbing. This initial period led to the creation of managerial positions and was characterised by a learning process for

all stakeholders involved, who had to negotiate different dubbing practices and working cultures from a range of countries. It resulted, first and foremost, in the realisation that "line-by-line translation is an illusion," as a dubbing scriptwriter commented. At the time, Netflix tried to implement the use of Excel for dubbing scripts to ensure an overview and standardisation of the corresponding lines between the different versions of a title. It was quickly realised that both linguistic complexities, as well as the transfer of tone, did not lend themselves to such a prescriptive and schematic approach. It is worth noting that the streamers do not necessarily show a better understanding of dubbing than the traditional national broadcasters used to. In this initial period of learning some important lessons, the streamers have, to some extent, been reinventing some wheels long in use.

Today, a noteworthy heterogeneity of lived professional experience seems to prevail amongst the creative dubbing practitioners we spoke to regarding their working relationships with international dubbing companies and streamers. Some claim that it "makes no difference" which company you work for, as they all provide some form of "key names and phrases" tools and guidelines, as previously discussed, and non-disclosure agreements for high-profile content are also a standard practice across the board. However, others have disclosed to us that differences between clients can be quite crucial, with the overall creative workflow depending fundamentally on the individual representative of the client one liaises with. In terms of our analytical approach, it is important to us to recognise said heterogeneity, and we have no intention to try to "resolve" it, recognising the complex relationship between consensus and dissensus that may be found in any given field (Bourdieu, 1993). Rather, with our focus on what happens when globalising structures meet established national working practices and cultures, we set out to identify overarching patterns whilst making space for tension and nuance.

One particular pattern that was strongly apparent from the beginning of the globalising infrastructures intersecting with national dubbing industries, especially very established ones such as in Europe, is a complex mix of cultural sensitivity and intersectional demographics within national dubbing industries. All of our informants confirmed a generational shift taking place within their national industry, using the term "the old guard" to describe dubbing actors, writers, and directors of a certain generation that has dominated their sector since the 1970s. These generational dynamics are characterised by the prevalence of entire families of dubbing practitioners—so-called "dubbing dynasties" (Bräutigam & Peiler, 2015; Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2006)—such as the Izzo family in Italy, the Kluckerts in Germany, and the Pradier-Bedetti-Trojani cluster in France. Within the context of a general lack of specialist training provision, emerging practitioners here would be inducted and receive on-the-job training from their parents, with some going on to lead a number of dubbing companies, as part of a form of accepted nepotism.

Partly as a result of this, national dubbing sectors have been marked by a habitus that has shown insufficient engagement with issues concerning equity, diversity, and inclusion, both in terms of linguistic translation and casting/crewing choices. One example here is Charles Rettinghaus, who has been the German voice for Black actors such as Jamie Foxx, and whose comments that "I'm white but maybe I have something black in my voice" (as cited in Rodek, 2021) and general observations in his own podcast *Die Stimmen der Anderen* (*The Voices of Others*), in which he interviews other practitioners, suggest a certain lack of self-awareness concerning privilege, access, and gate-keeping. There is a considerable gap, or lack of consensual conception (Born, 2010), between this and the position of both younger practitioners within the national industry, who have shown commitment to "a reflexivity of increasing self-knowledge [and] of voluntary ethical engagement" (Born, 2002, p. 69), and the globalising infrastructures, which are informed by socio-cultural contexts such as the USA,

where there is strong discursive engagement with equity, diversity, and inclusion. The priority placed on equity, diversity, and inclusion by streamers and global companies (which links to their strategic brand management) has not so much fostered friction between these clients and the practitioners "at the coalface" (as the clients dictate the terms), but has actually been helpful for managing generational change: it has provided leverage for younger practitioners to push for more diverse and socio-culturally mindful choices.

It is important to point to the nuance of the dynamics at stake here: earlier attempts by global companies to themselves run workshops to educate (new) practitioners were not very successful, because those workshops offered not tangible enough means of education, in that they were not attached to actual productions and existing workflows. In recent years, a small but impactful number of educational initiatives have been organised by younger practitioners, capitalising on the discursive "direction of travel" set by global companies. For instance, the German guild *Synchronverband* established Diversity-AG, a working group to help raise awareness and push for structural change within the sector. It actively works with the dubbing managers of key streamers to provide guidance, for example, in the form of glossaries to support engagement with issues concerning LGBTQIA+ and anti-ableism and remove barriers to access for emerging talent.

The repercussions of generational shifts can be observed across other industrial contexts, including cultural industries based on long-established artistic practices. However, given the relative smallness of the dubbing sector and the inherent lack of transparency of this "industry operating in the shadows"—a visual analogy made by everyone we interviewed—the impact that globalising infrastructures have had on dubbing practitioners is significant, throwing into relief generational fracture lines while addressing issues of access, awareness, and diversity. As one dubbing manager diplomatically told us, "change management is required," and this speaks to a complex process of knowledge exchange, expectation management and discursive reframing that continues to take place.

We now want to move our discussion to another pattern detectable when globalising structures meet established national working practices and cultures and the "conventions which have become normalised" (Mills & Horton, 2017, p. 11) within them: This pattern concerns "feedback culture" (an umbrella term used within the industry, which includes seeking clarification for queries across the work chain) and creative agency. Previously, national dubbing industries were marked by at best partially formalised workflows and routines in place for queries by dubbing scriptwriters, directors, and sound mixers. If dubbing scriptwriters had questions, they would usually endeavour to find answers themselves, with such problem-solving understood by them as part of their job and a sign of professional achievement and creative ownership. In case of queries that emerge in the dubbing studio, at the intersection of script and performance, the dubbing director could contact the dubbing scriptwriter (or client's representative), and this was in theory also available to dubbing sound mixers; but such opportunities for clarification and cross-checking were not built into the workflow.

Strikingly, this continues to be the case today: One scriptwriter we interviewed actively tries to address this by either asking to attend the recording session or trying to obtain the recording script, including the changes added by the director during the recording. As the scriptwriter explained, this is a deliberate attempt to keep control of the creative transformation of the dialogue from rough translation, via the formalised dubbing script to the actual performed dialogue. However, despite the efforts to claim creative ownership, induced by a high level of professional reflexivity, this approach is by no means integrated into

the standardised routines of a dubbing production, and depends on individual agency and a level of privilege, as such extra labour is not remunerated (issues concerning pay deserve attention that exceed the confines of this article). Streamers have strategically tried to establish more transparent and robust feedback cultures, as it was presented to us by managers; but this has occasionally been met with scepticism by some creative practitioners, who claim that "there's always been a feedback culture in the industry" and perceive these efforts as invasive means of exercising control (which is not untrue). With the pressure of accelerated timelines dictated by globally simultaneous releases of content, it is unlikely that dubbing timelines will be expanded to secure regular opportunities for exchange, and individual practitioners will continue to check in with colleagues on an ad-hoc basis or seek to resolve challenges using their own expertise and judgement to not delay projects. Here, it seems, creative agency has to be claimed individually as it is not formalised as part of the overall infrastructure.

In parallel to this, several practitioners we interviewed spoke to a lived professional experience marked by a generally decreasing degree of creative freedom since the 1990s. It is important to differentiate between a perceived loss of freedom by older practitioners in relation to linguistic and casting/crewing choices (see above), and the limitations experienced by younger practitioners as a result of changing work-flows due to technical innovations and a transformation of structures and hierarchies introduced by companies that operate internationally. With the latter, based on the rhetoric in our interviews, we get the sense that dubbing practitioners—despite the noted concerns about insufficient opportunities for raising queries across the work chain and commonly occurring complaints about "not being seen or recognised as equal partners" in the chain of production of a programme (or film)—very much consider themselves creative practitioners, with a strong urge for independence. One scriptwriter, elaborating on feedback loops amongst practitioners during productions, drew a parallel to collaborations in the field of music, pointing out how negatively it would be perceived by other musicians if peers were perceived to interfere with ongoing projects, or trying to "explain their craft to them." This duality concerning agency creates an interesting, at times challenging, terrain that representatives of the streamers and international companies have to negotiate. As we will discuss next, these issues concerning agency are even more accentuated when it comes to dubbing television specifically.

When asked whether there are (still) fundamental differences between dubbing television and film, almost all the practitioners we interviewed, across both the managerial and creative spectra, responded by first impulsively refuting this idea. On further reflection, they acknowledged a variety of conditions specific to television and the extent to which these affected their labour: with globally simultaneous release dates, timelines have accelerated and the resulting working conditions have become more pressured and complex. An episode of a high-profile show such as *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) takes approximately three weeks for the entire dubbing process in Germany, from rough translation to final sound mixing. If you compare this to the 1980s, when each hour of television—which at the time, on average, would have been marked by less narrative complexity such as specific world-building or intertextuality—to be dubbed would have two to three weeks available for the translation and between one and three days for the recording (Luyken et al., 1991), then it is clear that accelerated timelines and narrative complexity represent far from easy bedfellows for dubbing practitioners in recent years.

Streamers and global dubbing companies recognise this, and have taken measures to address it: Partly rooted in established practice, they seek to commission the same individual or teams for multiple seasons of

long-form programmes—which is only partially experienced as a form of collective agency strengthening by the practitioners themselves—and specifically commission practitioners who have reputations for genre-specific expertise. They have also implemented more structural measures such as the aforementioned glossaries and "creative letters," which are also intended to address continuity issues for the dubbing of long-running TV shows, where, as Barra (2013, p. 110) has pointed out, specific (catch) phrases and meaningful patterns across seasons may slip through the cracks at the intersection of dubbing workflows and television seriality. These hint at a stronger awareness of televisuality, such as narrative and tonal complexity; however, with some probing, these measures reveal themselves to be quite standardised and generic, and not much of a step up from the strategies that Wehn (1996) identified nearly 30 years ago as needed for dubbing cumulative narratives successfully (which included lists of character appearances, episode guides, or lists to track the use of formal/informal second-person pronouns). Crucially, if we remind ourselves of the subtleties involved in issues of tone—which Pye (2007, p. 7) defined in a film scholarship context as referring to "the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs"—then it becomes abundantly clear that current structural measures lack the capacity to help practitioners grapple with the narrative and tonal complexities of the content they are working with. These challenges are particularly pronounced when it comes to the first seasons of long-form programmes (see also Ranzato, 2012), which require key decisions to enable diachronic world-building and thus extra care.

Indeed, dubbing scriptwriters have consistently told us that they very regularly have to provide the dubbing script without any, or very little, contextual knowledge of where the rest of a series is going, a process which one practitioner described as "flying blind." This echoes Barra's (2013, p. 110) observation from over a decade ago:

> The Italian mediators' job is, in some ways, "blind": unlike the original authors, dubbing professionals have no idea about how the characters are going to develop, e.g., a minor character (whose voice may have been chosen without much thought) may acquire a major role, thus leading to poor results or drastic changes.

Such resonance is noticeable, not least given the fact that the dubbing manager positions created within the last decade are precisely intended to act as a nexus between globalised corporations and local practices, providing a contact point for queries and questions. Here, we found the most marked gap between the two broader sets of dubbing workforce that we interviewed: the managers see one of their key priorities as providing connective links (further facilitated through e.g., visits to recording sessions) and being readily available for practitioners seeking clarification or a sounding board; while creative practitioners, as one scriptwriter emphasised, find that such queries are perceived as disruptive, and that this perception is conveyed to them. This "dislocation between experience and its managerial representation" (Born, 2003, p. 75) serves as a reminder of "the relational nature of the field and the competitive position-taking characteristic of actors engaged in cultural production" (Born, 2010, p. 177).

Ultimately, while there is a strong consensus within the dubbing industry that the successful handling of issues of tone is one of the two key criteria for a successful dub, as noted earlier, the creative practitioners we interviewed highlighted that the responsibility for handling the narrative and tonal complexity of content to be dubbed is left to dubbing scriptwriters and dubbing directors. For example, all the scriptwriters we

spoke to noted that they compile "self-made" canonical glossaries for long-running content, especially programmes with extensive intertextual lore. Information available online, especially fan forums and other databases, was described as "extremely helpful" for fictional world (re-)building. Dubbing directors manage performance approaches for any number of major and minor roles, connecting granular detail to broader character sensibility and tonal strategies they glean from the script and audiovisual material, drawing on their creative expertise. Their work has been made more challenging through the shift from ensemble recording to individual recording, which became the standard already pre-Covid, but has been further complicated through the use of remote recording, which at the point of writing is not as utilised in European dubbing as it is in other contexts (e.g., Asia and the USA).

So, what we have here is an interesting dynamic: one where some agency and freedom have been moved away from creative practitioners, through the introduction of somewhat prescriptive guidance (e.g., glossaries), software tools, and feedback cultures shaped by corporate approaches and agendas, as well as managerial oversight. To briefly nod to dubbing sound mixing, more recently a level of agency here has been moved away from practitioners in local industries through "centralised mixing" (for some content, the final mix of all localised versions is done in the country of origin, to ensure that particular types of sound effects are done "properly"; our informants date the introduction of this practice to the emergence of blockbuster films such as the Marvel movies.) But, at the same time, some agency is left to these practitioners. This retained agency is felt most acutely in the case of dubbing television, where insufficient opportunities for exchange provide a contrast to the hyper-vigilance exercised for the dubbing of blockbuster films (where strong security protocols for such intellectual property lead to extreme working conditions that deserve further attention). To conceptualise this dynamic, we wish to offer the notion of oblique agency, which, borrowing from musicology, helps us think of the relative motion of two melodic parts in which one moves while the other remains (relatively) in place (see S. D. Miller, 1983). This enables us to capture the push–pull dynamic at stake when globalising structures meet established national working practices and cultures, which we hope will be of use for further scholarship on dubbing and other cultural practices.

We wish to stress the complexity of this dynamic: For example, while creative practitioners tend to be quite critical of the lack of built-in infrastructure for more exchange and support, they also express enjoyment of the creative control this enables for them, which is reminiscent of what they were used to. We also do not mean to imply any criticism of the work of the dubbing managers: Everyone we interviewed displayed a detailed insight into dubbing practices and a commitment to supporting creative practitioners—but there are simply not enough of them to be able to handle the sheer scale of (television) content being dubbed; and as Wehn (1996) noted nearly 30 years ago, there is a case to be made for more oversight with title-specific expertise. The issue we want to highlight is an infrastructural one, namely insufficient investment in dubbing: Guidelines and tools need to be developed further to become more meaningful, and larger teams of managers and expanded timelines would especially help facilitate engagement with televisuality. The ongoing absence of this investment suggests to us that there is, at a corporate level, still insufficient understanding of the challenges involved in dubbing, especially dubbing television—and/or unwillingness to change, because thanks to the creative practitioners and managers, global dubbing works, at least well enough. It may also signal to the creative practitioners that television programmes are perhaps still not getting taken quite as seriously as films by their global clients (see also Whitman-Linsen, 1992).

6. Conclusion

The "'complex machine' that translates, adapts, and prepares the dubbing of every imported TV show" (Barra, 2013, p. 102) has become more complex still as it has become more globalised. Both managerial and creative practitioners have had to negotiate a decisive period of transformation, and change continues apace. The current global landscape is marked by the intersection of accelerated timelines (which drive the need for streamlined workflows and smooth project management and standardisation), small managerial teams (negotiating the intersections of global and local structures/agendas from somewhat liminal positions), and considerable amounts of television content marked by narrative and tonal complexity. While televisuality may not be a concept that practitioners might quickly recognise as a meaningful issue, they are fully caught up in televisuality as it significantly defines their work, both in terms of TV industry infrastructures and the complexity of TV content. Dubbing, and especially dubbing for television, needs to be *still more fully* understood as a significantly creative process by the corporate headquarters, as narrative and tonal complexities cannot be managed through standardised glossaries, but deserve investment to facilitate more space for careful creative decision-making and collaborative exchange.

This challenge of understanding (television) dubbing more fully in terms of its inherent creativity is one that corporate headquarters share with many scholars. As this article has made clear, more research on the intricate developments within the field of globalised dubbing is needed, especially for emerging local industries without long traditions and established fixed routines (Barra, 2013). Such research must free itself from anachronistic views and biases prevalent in previous scholarship, as we have outlined. As has become clear to us after many conversations with managerial and creative practitioners, we have to diverge from Chaume's (2012, p. 76) perspective that for television, "the degree of perfection is not as high as that demanded by the big screen." In fact, we suggest that the development of television, industrially *and* aesthetically, might demand even greater attention to detail by dubbing practitioners to do justice to the narrative and tonal complexities of contemporary television.

Despite its value creation and profound cultural impact on the consumption of audiovisual media around the world, dubbing both as practice and industry is perceived (by all practitioners we spoke to) as fundamentally marginalised within the screen industry. This "shadow existence" feeds into it being a specifically intricate and complex field of cultural struggle (Bourdieu, 1993), marked by noticeable heterogeneity and inconsistency characterising the working relationships between creative practitioners and clients. These interactions, though part of "well-developed professional cultures of reflection and debate" (Born, 2000, p. 422) are "uneven," as they are strikingly individually motivated and negotiated, despite much public-facing rhetoric concerning standardisation. This field of cultural struggle is further marked by a tension, as pushing for more standardisation and top-down quality control has not solved the problems caused by insufficient investment, and as a result, oblique agency has emerged as a palpable but not fully acknowledged dynamic within the field, with a significant gap between the stated perspectives of the managerial and creative practitioners. This strongly suggests to us the need for more opportunities for knowledge exchange and (self) reflexivity, but perhaps somewhat differently facilitated than previous and current efforts led by both streamers and guilds such as the *Synchronverband*, not least given that this oblique dynamic may well affect how pressing challenges such as those posed by AI will be navigated. Finally, we hope that this specific case, namely the impact of globalising structures on local dubbing industries, provides relevant insights for engagement by scholars and indeed practitioners with the dynamics of other fields in which creative

labourers make significant, but perhaps under-acknowledged, contributions to culture that is "worth discussing and remembering" (Mills & Horton, 2017, p. 15).

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Conflict of Interests

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