Metaphor in short films: The challenges of subtitling for international film festivals

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This paper draws from the experience of supervising the subtitling of short films for several international film festivals carried out by MA students in Specialised Translation between 2021 and 2022. Starting from some considerations on the effectiveness of using short films in the didactics of translation, it will establish a parallel between the operations of synthesis activated in metaphor to resolve complex conflictual meanings creatively and those involved in short films. The unifying function played by metaphorical structures will be investigated in a selection of case studies, underlining the importance of preserving cultural, cognitive, and textual cohesion in the translation. Considering the inevitable metonymic-metaphoric continuum that characterises audiovisual texts and the need to avoid intersemiotic tension between channels in the subtitling process, the discussion will revolve around examples taken from different subgenres, from documentary to poetry films, aimed to illustrate a spectrum of challenges posed by the translation of metaphors and the strategies used to resolve them while respecting the viewer's space for interpretation and, more generally, the delicate 'ecosystem' of the short film.

Keywords: Audiovisual Translation; Film Festivals; Metaphor; Short Films; Subtitles

1. Introduction

The paper stems from the experience of supervising groups of postgraduate students majoring in Specialised Translation in the subtitling process of short films for three international film festivals based in Italy: Irish Film Festa, Bardolino Film Festival, and Climate Space Film & Music. Although these events have different missions and sponsors (mainly cultural institutes and governmental agencies providing funding programmes for supporting the arts), they share some common traits, namely the promotion of quality independent films through international competitions and a commitment to environmental, cultural, and social issues. Most of the works submitted to be shortlisted are independent productions, previews, or unreleased classics, often presented within different sections according to theme, genre, and format (feature films and shorts, with a predominance of the latter). The

festivals are organised by non-profit cultural associations, yet reducing costs is only one of the reasons for subtitling, rather than dubbing, the films; there are, in fact, other key motives, namely allowing viewers to experience the films with their original soundtracks and getting a feeling of a truly multicultural, multilingual contest.

The transnational infrastructure and the collective dimension of film festivals may involve, besides filmmakers, audiences, technologies, sponsors and the press, also educational initiatives (Jenkins, 2018). One of these is the collaboration with universities for the translation of short films originally produced in the most diverse world languages, often accompanied by a bridge translation in English, and made accessible to the local audience though the subtitles. Several studies have highlighted the effectiveness of integrating subtitling practices in the classroom to enhance foreign language/culture acquisition and media literacy (Baumann, 2016; Beseghi, 2015; Diaz Cíntas & Remael, 2014; Rundle, 2008). Rundle (2008), in particular, has emphasised the achievement of professional skills, the combination of "knowledge and technique" (p. 15) as well as the collaborative dynamics of the training, teamwork being at the core of the subtitling process, as also underlined by Sánchez (2004). In fact, subtitling requires a pragmatic and functional approach to the language, as well as the overcoming of the challenges posed by audiovisual texts as complex semiotic systems involving different channels: verbal audio (the dialogues and their prosodic traits), non-verbal audio (background music and sound effects), verbal visual (cards and other verbal information) and non-verbal visual (composition, props, colour, shot types and editing techniques); the limitations of a form of translation that is inherently diasemiotic, as it implies a transfer from oral to written discourse (Gottlieb, 2004); time-space restraints due to reading time, synchronisation, screen safe area, to which linguistic and cultural challenges must be added, particularly in the multi-ethnic context of international festivals.

As already remarked, most of the films were shorts, between eight and forty minutes long. In fact, international festivals are the principal promoters of shorts, which are not considered as a minor genre but valued for their expressive and artistic quality (Felando, 2015). Like feature films, shorts are generally classified within the traditional cinematic genres: documentary, comedy and drama, animated film, poetry film, etc. Favourite patterns in shorts are coming-of-age stories, character sketches and representations of social and environmental issues, often combined with representations of dreams, fantasies, and surrealism. However, scholars of film studies tend to underline the lack of a canon, given the enormous number and variety of productions (Cooper & Dancyger, 2009). Moreover, although some short films undeniably present an essential linearity (Baumann, 2016), many of them tend to be more experimental in the use of time and narrative techniques than lengthy feature

ones, and to show more of freedom in their way of blending realism and symbolism, with a predominance of metaphor and literary devices (Cooper & Dancyger, 2009).

From a didactic point of view, shorts are ideal units to deal with: they are manageable, self-contained texts with a strong identity, both at the visual and at the verbal levels, and they contain dialogues that, though particularly rich in sociocultural references and subtext, are limited in terms of numbers of lines. Therefore, they can be easily integrated into the classroom, to enhance film literacy as well as many other competence domains and individual sub-competences, which are listed by Thaler (2017, p. 16) as follows:

- Functional communicative competences → particularly listening-viewing

- Intercultural communicative competences → culture-specific references

- Text and media competences → cinematic devices

- Language awareness → sociolects, regiolects

- Language learning competences → extramural English with online platforms.

The concentrated storytelling of short films allows teachers to better focus on narrative patterns, cohesion, and characterisation (Baumann, 2016; Donaghy, 2015; Herrero & Vanderschelden, 2019; Thaler, 2017), elements that are essential also from the translational perspective.

As argued in §2, evidence shows that there is a relation between the format of the short film and the "embrace of metaphor" (Cooper & Dancyger, 2009, p. 230). In fact, condensed, especially experimental, storytelling and the presence of undertones and subtext are closely interrelated in shorts (Thurlow & Thurlow, 2012), and it is in this interrelatedness that translational aspects have been paid attention to during the different phases of the subtitling process, particularly in the final, simulation stage, i.e., the screening of the short film with the complete subtitles (Sánchez, 2004), in co-presence with the groups of students who had worked at their translation and synchronisation. During these sessions, the functional role played by metaphor within the whole architecture of the text was thoroughly discussed.

The aim of this article is to show the "extra complexities" (Pedersen, 2015, p. 172) in audiovisual translation deriving from the need to translate metaphorical structures (Tseng, 2013) in short films. Moving from the assumption that metaphor and short films share common traits and functions

based on "operations of synthesis" (Sobolev, 2008), the study will focus on relevant case studies belonging to different subgenres—from realistic social representation to melodrama, and from the documentary to the short poetry film—and the problems arising during the subtitling process. In doing so, it will consider:

(1) the difficulty of avoiding intersemiotic tension between discourse channels;
(2) the (partial) overlapping between the metaphoric and the metonymic dimension in audiovisual texts;
(3) the cognitive and textual complexity achieved through metaphor in the short film;
(4) the translator's need to negotiate between ensuring intelligibility and preserving the audience's space for interpretation;
(5) the difficulty of maintaining metaphors' integrity in the subtitles due to time-space constraints; and
(6) the awareness that linguistic challenges regarding the translation of metaphor routinely experienced in audiovisual translation present a higher level of complexity in shorts, given the intricate blending of realism and symbolism that can be observed both in factual subgenres such as documentaries and, at a higher degree, in so-called 'poetry films' (Wees, 1984).

2. Background

According to Pedersen (2015, p. 172), in audiovisual translation the ambiguity deriving from the fact that: "the vehicle of the metaphor is visible on screen, [. . .] with one sense coming through one discourse channel and the other coming via another of the discourse channels that makes up the polysemiotic text" may cause "extra complexities," since the subtitles should include the figurative sense without contradicting what the viewer sees or, thus creating "unintended intersemiotic tension." This can be no easy task, especially when different metaphors are used in different languages and the imagery lexicalised in the source text does not correspond to the imagery in the target text. Hence, metaphors may become "sources of translation crisis points" that oblige translators to abandon their "automated processes and resort to strategic behaviour" (p. 166). Particularly in the tightly woven literal-figurative texture of shorts, where visual and aural details are generally used and organised so as "to develop a tone that creates metaphor" (Cooper & Dancyger, 2009, p. 209), translators who are unable to find equivalent expressions in the target language need to resort to alternative metaphors and comparisons (Perez-Gonzalez, 2014) or may sometimes find no solution at all.

Relying on the traditional modes for transferring metaphoric meaning (Lindqvist, 2002; van den Broeck, 1981), Pedersen (2015, p. 167) lists the following strategies:

(1) Word-for-word translation
(2) Substitution of one figure of speech with another figure of speech (for example a simile instead of a metaphor)
(3) Paraphrase (substitution with a non-metaphorical expression)
(4) Compensation 1 (a non-metaphorical expression translated with a metaphorical expression)
(5) Complete omission
(6) Compensation 2 (a non-metaphorical expression translated with a metaphorical expression elsewhere in the text)

Also Toury (2012), with reference to translation in all its forms, sustains that the translator facing a metaphor in the source text may render it with a similar metaphor, a different metaphor, a non-metaphor (meaning a weaker form) or with no metaphor at all. The two latter cases can be evidence of the existence of a "law of growing standardization" (Toury, 2012, p. 303) in the transposition from the original language to the target language. However, also the opposite process may occur, with the translator introducing into the target text a metaphor that was either present in the source text in a weaker form or not present at all.

In audiovisual translation standardisation may occur at different levels, not only in dubbing (Pavesi, 2005) but also in subtitling (Pedersen, 2020). It should be noted that in subtitles the recourse to simplified metaphoric constructions or omissions can be due not only to the translator's inability to find an adequate solution in the target language but to strict prescriptive norms (Pedersen, 2020) and, more generally, to space and time constraints, namely the need to comply with the 'safe area' on the screen, which allows a maximum of 35-40 characters per line for one or two lines, and with reading time, i.e., 1 to 6 seconds. Due to these limitations, the translator may face the impossibility to preserve the metaphor's integrity as a unit (Toury, 2012), hence the necessity to resort to the above translational strategies.

3. Operations of synthesis in the short film and in metaphor

As underlined by film studies scholars, short films present a "meticulous narrative compression" (Felando 2015, p. 1), they are "all about compression" (Cooper & Dancyger, 2009, p. 164). The density of the storytelling owes to the fact that shorts are "economical and narrowly focused" on a single, compelling situation; they present one plotline, few characters, "a particular unity and

cohesion out of a single mind and imagination" (Felando, 2015, p. 47). On this account, comparisons have frequently been made between the short film and the short story. Edgar Allan Poe was the first to theorise about the short story's unity and intensity, while Henry James stressed the "compactedness of anecdote," the "beauty and lucidity" achieved in "the short spurt and in the smaller piece" (James, 1984[1907-9], p. 38).

Bachelard (1968) pointed out that, even when a text presents several metaphors, they can be brought back to one image that refracts and projects them. This is also true for audiovisual texts, particularly shorts, which are defined by contemporary filmmaker Gareth Evans as "crystalline creations of precise, prismatic intensity" (Felando, 2015, p. 50). According to Cooper and Dancyger (2009, p. 169), "Like the short story, metaphor [. . .] can work in the short melodrama in a way that the need for greater characterization and plot tends to disallow in the long film." The interdependency of metaphors with the representational system in which they appear (Kittay, 1989) is here particularly cogent. Combining the linguistic-cognitive approach and the formalist one, Tseng (2013) convincingly argues that narrative cohesion is achieved in film cross-modally and through "cohesive ties [. . .] established between characters, objects, settings and characters' actions" (p. 1), which organise themselves into functional action patterns to reflect "a particular type of metaphorical structure" (p. 4). We may infer that, whereas lengthy feature films contain reiterated action patterns and hence a constellation of metaphorical structures that can be variously mapped, shorts present one action pattern that coalesces into an all-pervasive metaphorical structure. In other words, metaphor acts in shorts as a powerful unifying principle, enhancing the perception of cohesion in the storytelling.

Throughout her book, Tseng (2013) underlines that metaphorical structures may trigger comprehension and interpretation only insofar as the systems of relations between different domains are mobilised in the viewer's culture. This aspect is also stressed by Sobolev (2008, p. 903), who maintains that it is in this broad cultural perspective that metaphors create "synthetic relations" and may therefore act as 'models' of the "operations of synthesis":

> within a paradigm that tends to view culture as a field of partial and heterogeneous determinations, the significance of metaphor as a model must only grow. One of the operations central to the very being of culture, when viewed as such a field of heterogeneous determinations, is that of the creation of synthetic relations. Such operations of synthesis range from the narrative synthesis of heterogeneous historical and personal materials to the basic operations of the cultural constructions of existential space and time. Therefore, being one of the simplest and most exhaustively studied operations of synthesis, metaphor may serve

as a good case study and thus as a model of the analysis of the operations of synthesis in general. (Sobolev, 2008, p. 903)

Both Tseng (2013) and Sobolev (2008) agree that these operations of synthesis are accomplished at the cognitive and narrative levels only if different domains are brought together in culturally predictable ways or, "within a certain space of possibilities" (Tseng, 2013, p. 33). However, metaphorical structures occurring in short films—especially experimental ones—may considerably depart from the conventional use of action patterns normally found in lengthy feature films. On this account, it is relevant to resort to Prandi's (2017) argument according to which coherence can be achieved in metaphor not by establishing a conceptual order, as is the case with metonymy, but by redesigning familiar concepts (see also Kittay, 1989). Prandi observes that in metaphor, conflictual combinations 'valorise' the presence of the intruder, through a dynamic process that "opens the door to creativity" (Prandi, 2017, p. 151, translation mine). He also remarks that the co-existence of conflictual meanings enhances the unifying power of formal syntactic structures, thus offering a privileged insight into their inter-connectedness. This view effectively applies to short films: unlike lengthy feature films, few shorts (including documentaries; cf. § 7) resolve complex conflictual meanings at the strictly narrative or metonymical levels: they do so by creatively incorporating through metaphor the conflictual complex meanings involved.

Starting from the assumptions that short films strongly rely on metaphor, the article will investigate how the need to preserve its structural, cognitive and cultural functions has to be constantly kept under control in the subtitling process of shorts, and how this can be done by resorting to the strategies identified by Lindqvist (2002), Pedersen (2015), van den Broeck (1981) and, in several cases, to what Baumann (2016, p. 120) defines as "lateral thinking."

4. Metaphor as a device for cohesion in short films

An interesting example of metaphor as a device for cohesion can be observed in the short film *Rat* (Sarah Gordon, 2021), where the rat of the title is, at once and at the same time, the engine of the plot, a character in the story and a metaphoric representation of execrable human behaviours and states of mind (being dirty, living as parasites, cowardly searching ways of escape when feeling trapped, etc.). The whole story is extensively and compactedly constructed around this metaphor, which gives coherence to the conflictual elements of the plot. Carol, an Irish working-class housewife mistreated by her husband, a garbageman, finds a big rat in the house. When she asks him to kill it, he just goes on watching TV, laughing and munching biscuits and, without even looking at her, replies that *she* must do it. It's just the umpteenth proof of evidence that he doesn't care at all for his wife, that he is not going to move a

finger to solve household issues. The analogy between the rat and the husband soon becomes apparent. His making fun of her awkward advances addressed to the young, sympathising substitute postman and his beating her when he finds out that she has lied to him in order to attract the young man into the house, will be the last straw: she will poison both the rat and her husband. The idea of murder itself (1) is stressed through an idiomatic expression—about the connection of idioms and metaphor, see Clausner and Croft (1997)—that is unfortunately neutralised in the translation, due to the lack of an equivalent idiom in Italian and the necessity to comply with reading time (15 characters per second), which did not allow the possibility of resorting to a longer paraphrase (van den Broeck, 1981):

	English Subtitles:	**Italian Subtitles:**	**Back Translation:**
(1)	Oh! Hello again! How goes the murder spree?	Salve di nuovo! Come va l'omicidio?	Oh! Hello again! How goes the murder?

As the plot develops also the postman and the woman will alternatively become the rat of the title, the former when he is found by Carol's husband in the house, the latter when she receives a call from the police, who want to inform her about the death of her husband in a crash, while she thinks they have come to arrest her for killing him. In the first case (2), the recurring metaphor of bestiality stressed in the dialogues could be translated 'sensu stricto' (van den Broeck, 1981), since a similar expression exists also in Italian.

	English Subtitles:	**Italian Subtitles:**
(2)	My specialty is 14 Kit Kats arranged on a plate, and then I eat them all in one go. Two fingers or four fingers? Two! I'm not an **animal**!	La mia specialità sono 14 Kit Kat distribuiti su un piatto, e poi li mangio tutti in una volta. Due alla volta o quattro? Due! Non sono un **animale**!

The analogy is consistently carried out not only verbally but by means of visual devices. For example, a frequent shot type in *Rat* is Point-of-View (POV), a subjective camera technique that is used here to show the audience what the husband or the rat see, thus suggesting their imperceptible sneaking behind Carol's back. In fact, Pedersen describes metaphor in terms of (partial) analogy (the grounds): "metaphors have the function of describing or understanding that which is abstract and/or complex by using concepts that are simpler and/or more concrete, by means of similarity or [...] analogy" (Pedersen, 2015, p. 164). In cinematic language, analogical juxtaposition is realized through verbal, visual, and auditory components, thus acquiring a higher degree of concreteness: an idea, a feeling, a concept can be represented in an object (a

prop) that appears in the mise-en-scène (set design), but can also be suggested by colour, costume, blocking (the actors' positions and movements on the set), kinesics (posture, gestures, facial expressions), photography, shooting (camera angles) and editing techniques, as well as by the soundtrack (background noise, intra and extradiegetic sounds and music). It is important to underline that, in order to make meaning, all these elements need to be relevant to the story and to the cultural aspects explored. Indeed, the semiotic complexity of audiovisual texts is the outcome of the combination of dialogue with visual and aural devices syntagmatically arranged so as to be, at once and at the same time, diegetically and culturally significant.

5. The metaphor-metonymy continuum in short films

Prandi (2017) argues that metaphors and metonymies can be seen as different ways of facing conflict, the former by transferring the concept to a different domain, the latter by activating a coherent relationship between the domains involved. Radden, by contrast, suggests that instead of "separating the two we may much rather think of a metonymy-metaphor continuum with unclear or fuzzy cases in between. Metonymy and metaphor may be seen as prototypical categories at the endpoints of this continuum" (Radden, 2003, p. 93).

However difficult it may be to sustain the idea in verbal communication (Delabastita 1993), the metonymy-metaphor continuum inevitably applies to visual media, where metaphor necessarily acquires metonymic consistency, since "the relationship between the denotative signifier and significate is never arbitrary, that is to say, it is motivated by the perceptual similarity between them" (Metz, 1974, p. 108). This is indeed one of the aspects that distinguish film language from verbal language. In fact, filmmakers generally exploit both the denotative likeness between real and screened objects and sounds, on the one hand, and the connotative level of visual and aural analogies, on the other:

> The sound of a ticking clock in a scene may be simply part of ambient sound, or [. . .] serve as a metaphor for the passage of time. [. . .] Sometimes the long wail of a locomotive reminds us that our character leaves near railroad tracks; sometimes it serves as a metaphor for a character's yearning to escape the confines of his or her life (Cooper & Dancyger, 2009, pp. 31-32).

It can be argued that, from this perspective, the translated shorts placed themselves on different points of the metaphor-metonymy cline. The animated film *Mam's Old Chair* (Sheena Walsh, 2021), for example, shows a bend towards the metonymic pole. The kitchen chair found in an Antiquities' shop by the old lady triggers flashbacks of childhood, ending up as an epitome of family and social life seen nostalgically, but it never goes beyond a coherent connection

between the domains involved. By contrast in *The Poor People* (Lolita Naranovich, 2020), a short film charged with visual metaphors as is often the case with melodrama (Kozloff, 2000), the rocking cradle incorporates a deeper level of metaphorisation: it stands for life, maternal love beyond death, human solidarity, and much more. In both shorts metonymical contiguity is visually stressed rather than concealed—the little girl perched on the chair brushing her mother's hair and the dead mother whose arm keeps rocking the cradle—but the second one displays an excess of meaning that could not easily be rendered at the linguistic level.

The Poor People is an adaptation of a tale by Leon Tolstoy, itself a re-elaboration of a poem by Victor Hugo. We are in late nineteenth-century Russia. A fisherman has gone out to sea, to get some food for his nearly starving children. His wife is waiting at home, sitting by the fire, mending a sail, praying intensely that her husband may safely come back despite the storm that is raging outside. In fact, his boat has been overturned, and he is seen struggling with the waves and sinking into the sea. Then the miracle occurs. When he finally gets home during the night, his bedazzled wife tells him that their neighbour, a widowed mother, has starved to death. Yet, even if she was dying, she kept rocking her youngest baby's cradle. The pious, dutiful husband tells her to immediately bring the motherless children to their home: they will take care of them, regardless of their scanty means. However, the image of the cradle rocked by the dead will always remain with them.

The Italian subtitles (3) did not consider the metaphor of the aching heart ("her heart ached"), which was translated with the literal expression "she felt too much sorrow for her children," while the evocative picture of the cradle being rocked by the dead, powerfully conveyed in the English subtitles by the repetition of the verb in the present continuous tense ("rocking and rocking") suggested a sense of eternal, unchanging contingency that the use of the imperfect tense in Italian ("dondolava … dondolava" = "rocked … rocked") fell short to reproduce.

	English Subtitles:	**Italian Subtitles:**
(3)	It was a difficult death for her.	La sua è stata una morte difficile.
	Her heart ached for the children!	**Provava troppo dolore** per i figli!
	Her arm was stiff,	Il braccio era gelido,
	but **the cradle kept on rocking** …	ma **la culla ancora dondolava** …
	Rocking and rocking …	**Dondolava** … **dondolava** …
	Vera!	Vera!
	Rocking and rocking …	**Dondolava** … **dondolava** …

In the English subtitles the metaphor of the rocking cradle is verbally maintained until the end, where it is rhythmically echoed by the idiomatic expression "so it goes" in the closing line (in Example 4). This rhetorical logic got also inevitably lost in the expansion that became necessary in the Italian subtitle, since the closest Italian equivalent of the phrase contains a higher level of explicitness. An alternative could have been "This is how things go," but in either case the vagueness/inclusiveness of the pronoun "it" would have been nullified.

	English Subtitles:	Italian Subtitles:	Back Translation
(4)	Close your eyes.	Chiudi gli occhi.	Close your eyes.
	Rock-a bye ...	Fai la ninna ...	Rock-a-bye ...
	Rock-a-bye ...	Fai la ninna ...	Rock-a-bye ...
	Rock-a-bye ...	Fai la nanna ...	Rock-a-bye ...
	So it goes ...	**Così è la vita ...**	**This is life ...**

This leads to a more general consideration. As a rule, in rendering verbal information (the dialogues and, eventually, the graphics) in the subtitles, translators should try to preserve the metaphorical complexity of the text. § 6 will focus on the importance of allowing a reasonable degree of intelligibility while avoiding the handling of figurative language as a riddle to be solved for the benefit of the listener-viewer.

6. Preserving the viewer's space for interpretation

It is important to underline that visual information itself provides a high degree of explicitness and contextualisation. As Perez-Gonzales (2014, pp. 221-222) argues:

> [. . .] the result of this visual-verbal metaphorical play establishes a well definable inter-modal relationship. Ultimately, the mental mapping of the linguistic signifier [. . .] onto its visual counterpart [. . .] significantly increases the contextual propensity in this frame and, concomitantly, lowers the viewer's 'interpretative space'. In other words, the more explicit the film director's communicative intentions are, the more limited is viewers' capacity to construct their own interpretation.

In fact, the translator's work partakes the author's control on communicative intentions. As exemplified by Dickins et al. (2002) solutions in the target text can potentially place themselves in different parts of the metonymy-metaphor continuum, although in general they tend to produce a "leftward shifting" (p. 201) towards the metonymic pole. In the subtitles, particularly within the delicate 'ecosystem' of shorts, this shifting must be carefully handled by the

translator, who has to decide which strategy to adopt in conveying the surplus of meaning.

To illustrate the above consideration, I will provide some examples from the short film *Ruthless* (Matthew McGuigan, 2021). The title is based on a pun whose polysemy is invested with both metonymic and (context-bound) metaphoric implications, thus acting as an agent of synthesis and coherence (Delabastita, 1993). The short tells the story of a boy who lives in Belfast with his widowed father. "Ruth" was the name given by his dead wife to the plaster prosthesis leg he used to wear before he had received from the NHS a more technological, yet less comfortable, one. After his wife's death, Ruth had been put away in a closet, as a cherished memory of past, happily married life: a metonymy and a metaphor fused into one object. But Ruthless also has a literal meaning: when the boy is denied by his father the money to buy the new album by T-Rex, he decides to steal it and sell it to the pawnshop. Knowing how important Ruth was for his father, he is actually behaving in a ruthless, pitiless way. When he realises this, he decides to go back to the pawnshop and reclaim the leg back: he will do without the album of his favourite rock band rather than cause grief to his loving father.

The title was the first translational problem, as it was important to convey the correct expectations to the listener-viewer while maintaining its functional complexity (Baumann, 2016). Titles are preferably left untranslated in film festivals, to preserve the foreign flavour and the connotations of the original text. However, in this case, "Ruth" and "less" were visually emphasised in the opening credits by a timed, separate fading in of the lexical item "ruth" and the suffix "less;" in addition to this, references and wordplays on the leg's name pervaded the film's dialogues, so it was contextually relevant to translate it. In the end, we opted for a card that explained the pun (5):

(5) SENZA RUTH
       (SENZA PIETÀ)

Although the wordplay was unveiled and therefore neutralised (it also went unnoticed in the ensuing dialogues, unless the viewer understood English), this choice made it possible, for example, to understand why the pawnshop owner laughed bitterly when he told the boy that his father was now "ruthless." This was a consequence of the fact that polysemies are language-bound and may "*not* recur in other languages" (Delabastita, 1993, p. 239).

We made a different choice when it came to the translation of the visualised metaphor that appears in the first scene. We are told about the death of the mother through the image of a broken cup with "Best mom" painted on it. The students asked whether it needed to be rendered in a card, as is usually the

case with visual verbal information that is relevant to the plot, but were advised not to, as the cup appears only for a second and reading the subtitle would have nullified the dramatic significance of the image, juxtaposed as it is to the close-up on the child's face, making up in front of the mirror, a visual metaphor on the grieving process and the "dead mother complex" theorised by Green (1986, pp. 142-173). Most of all, the written caption would have made the analogy too explicit, drastically reducing the viewer's space for interpretation.

The leg itself, held by the boy like a gun, seems to embody "Chekov's gun," the dramatic principle according to which everything that appears on stage (or on screen) needs to be functional to the narrative ("One must never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. It's wrong to make promises you don't mean to keep," Chekov wrote in a letter to Aleksandr Semenovich Lazarev dated 1 November 1889) or, as Drăgan (2021, p. 227) has put it, "the symbolic form [. . .] in relation to the need for 'essentiality' in storytelling." Chekov's metaphor of the gun is revelatory of the double, literal and figurative nature of cinematic objects. In *Ruthless*, the gun/leg is "loaded" with metaphoric meaning: it stands in the film for loss, Oedipus's revenge against the father who has denied gratification (the money to buy the T-Rex album), but it also provides actual socio-political references to the British Army that is patrolling the Irish city. To the point that, when the soldiers stop the boy thinking that he is carrying a real gun for some terrorist organisation, the viewer experiences a sort of short-circuit between the literal and figurative dimensions of the object. In conclusion, this short film seems to exemplify Newmark's (1988) identification of the two functions and purposes in metaphor: (1) referential and cognitive (they are used to describe and identify); (2) pragmatic and aesthetic (they are used to appeal to our senses). These two functions should ideally combine both in the source text and in the target text.

7. Metaphors as sources of translation crisis points from documentary to 'poetry' short films

Short documentary films provide evidence of Espasa's (2004, p. 194) claim that "documentary" is a "fuzzy definition" which may vary greatly "across different times and audiences" and whose "many functions (denunciation, exploration, propaganda, etc.) [. . .] entail translation and research needs [that] are still largely unexplored." Espasa suggests that translating precise terminology is only one of the challenges of this "protean genre" (*ibid*.). Indeed, in many of the short documentary films translated for the film festivals figurative language was equally demanding and deserved the translator's attention, thus indicating that the statements "a documentary is not a film" and "documentary translation is not specifically audiovisual" are two myths that need to be dismantled (Espasa, 2004, p. 184).

As suggested in §1 most short films are characterised, though in various degrees, by a combination of realism and symbolism. More evidently than in other formats, even documentary short films are seldom purely referential and factual. Those of Climate Space Film & Music, for example, aim at raising awareness about environmental issues by connecting them to personal experience and integrating the representation of the topics within a narrative framework. This can be observed, for example, in the following line (in Example 6) from *From Weedy Forests to Grassy Woodland* (Jordan Osmond, 2021), a short film dealing with permaculture as a natural response to the plague of Australian bushfires:

	English Subtitle	**Italian Subtitle**
(6)	This forest **has grown me up**.	Questa foresta **mi ha fatto crescere.**

The documentary films of Climate Space frequently resort to figurative language, similes, and metaphors. The next example is taken from *Echoes in the Arctic* (Andy Maser, Paul Nicken & Taharia Sheather, 2021), where metaphors are constantly used as verbal counterpoints to the pictures, to tell "a story in a different way than facts and numbers," as a member of the expedition team concedes. The detailed ethological descriptions and data conveyed by the live, seemingly spontaneous conversations alternate with the lyrical, definitely "written to be spoken" (Snell-Hornby, 2006, pp. 84-85) storytelling performed through the voice-over, also identifiable with a member of the expedition but set in a different, more charming and intimate mode. Through a complex imagery, the voice (7) reports the arrival of killer whales near the Northern costs of Norway and their circling while feeding on herring:

	English Subtitles:	**Italian Subtitles:**
(7)	What you see is darkness.	Non vedi altro che oscurità,
	It's **like ink**.	che **ha il colore dell'inchiostro**.
	And out of that **twilight**,	All'improvviso da quel **crepuscolo**,
	Out of that **moodiness**,	da quella **penombra**,
	comes a **flash of white**.	arriva un **lampo di luce bianca**.
	It's just a **ghost**	Ma è solo uno **spettro**
	coming out of the dark	che emerge dal buio
	and of the **inky blackness**	e dalla **nera oscurità** degli abissi.
	of the deep.	
	The herring is a ballet,	**Il balletto delle aringhe**.
	the symphony of this fish	**La sinfonia di questo pesce**
	swimming in unison.	che nuota all'unisono con gli altri.

In this short documentary film, scientific terminology is definitely not the main concern of the translator. Register and lexical choices in the subtitles reflect the attempt to preserve the lyricism of the description and the power of metaphoric language. Expressions that fall short of rendering the complex interplay of metaphors within the text stand out among the word-for-word transpositions as omissions: for example, 'moodiness' (translated with 'penombra,' a more evocative synonym for 'crepuscolo' = 'twilight' which, however, does not imply personification); 'inky blackness,' rendered through amplification of the noun 'oscurità' (= 'darkness') by the addition of the adjective 'nera' (= 'black'), results in 'nera oscurità' ('black darkness'), a phrase in which intensification is obtained though redundancy rather than through analogical juxtaposition (Pedersen, 2015).

Although metaphors, as highlighted in these examples, are very frequent also in documentary short films, they become particularly pervasive in 'poetry' films, a subgenre in which poetry and visual imagery are fused, thus expanding "upon the specific denotations of words and the limited iconic references of images to produce a much broader range of connotations, associations, metaphors" (Wees, 1984, p. 109). With their nonlinear narrative and experimental editing style, shorts are ideal formats for presenting flows of images blended with poetry. Here, too, screened dialogue, often a literary adaptation (although the effect can be similar to that of an impromptu poem), is generally performed as voice-over.

In the English and Italian subtitles of *Constance* (Úna Kavanagh, 2021), a short film based on Constance Markievicz's *Prison Letters* (1924) selected for the Irish Film Festa in 2022, the need to preserve the metaphoric and cognitive dimension of the storytelling was vital. The short revolves around the story of Countess Constance Markievicz (1868-1927), an Irish activist who fought for independence and took part in the Eastern Rising of 1916. She was arrested the first time in 1911, while protesting for the visit of King George V to Dublin, and then spent most of her life in and out of prison, where she wrote her letters and poems, often on toilet paper. In this short film, the voice-over faithfully reports the words in the letters, while the visuals provide both the physical and the cognitive setting of the prison. The storytelling is conveyed through a sequence of similes and mixed metaphors. It is worth noticing that, as underlined by Gibbs (2016, p. *ix*), even mixed metaphors "do not reflect cognitive errors or necessarily impede our understanding" of the character's state of mind and of the historical context in which the story is set. As confirmed by Conceptual Metaphor Theory, "permissible mixed metaphors" fall in "an overlapping of purposes" and therefore "there is a coherence between them" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 96).

In fact, the juxtaposition of different semantic fields and the seeming clash of conflictual meanings does not jeopardise the unity and coherence of the text,

since all the metaphors and similes used finally reflect one single image, that of the prison. In the following lines (8), Constance compares her political militancy for Irish independence to the power of the sea. That force has eventually clashed against the British armies (the rock) in a climax of will, then been scattered and quelled, but the memory of the struggle, the passion, has stayed with her even in confinement. She then—at once calmly and feverishly—recollects the righteousness of her action and the brightness of her immense vision, which is said to be beyond the power of speech.

	English Subtitles:	**Italian Subtitles:**
(8)	All my life,	Tutta la mia vita,
	in a funny way,	che strano,
	Seems to have led to the past year.	Sembra condurre all'anno scorso.
	And it's been **such a hurry scurry of a life**.	È stata **una vita così frenetica**.
	Now I feel that I have done	Ora so di aver fatto
	what I was born to do.	Ciò per cui sono nata.
	The great wave	**La grande onda**
	has crashed against the rock.	**si è infranta sulla roccia**
	And now **all the bubbles**,	e ora **tutte le bolle**
	and little me,	e la piccola me,
	slip back into a quiet pool of the sea.	**ritornano in una pozza di mare tranquillo**.
	As I…	Mentre…
	As I drew closer to the end of all desire,	Mentre mi avvicinavo alla fine di tutti i desideri
	I brought my longings adore	le mie aspirazioni
	to final height.	raggiungevano il culmine.
	Just as I ought…	Doveva essere così…
	My vision becoming clear…	La mia visione diventava chiara…
	Entered more and more	Penetrava sempre più
	the beam of that white light	nel fascio di quella luce bianca
	which shines on its own truth.	Che risplende di verità propria.
	From then my seeing	Poi la mia visione,
	Became too large for speech	divenne troppo vasta per la parola,
	Which fails at a sight	che nulla può davanti a una vista
	Beyond all boundaries	sconfinata
	and memory's undoing.	e al disfarsi della memoria.

Although there is no line in this scene which is *not* metaphorical, only those that are relevant to a discussion in a translational perspective have been highlighted. The subtitles seem mainly to follow the technique of word-for-word translation (Lindqvist, 2002; van den Broeck, 1981), as well as forms of standardisation ("hurry-scurry" becomes "frenetica" = "frantic"). Problems aroused with the translation of "pool," which in English has more positive connotations than "pozza" (= "puddle") but could not be translated with a more effective expression. Therefore, a process of compensation occurred in attributing quietness to the sea ("mare tranquillo").

Translation crisis points (Pedersen, 2015) were especially experienced when the figurative language articulated through the voice-over was reinforced by the images. Indeed, it was constantly necessary to consider the combination of mise-en-scène and camera angles, the establishing shot on the prison's tiny window with the ladder against it and the extreme close-up on Constance's eyes and face. This impression of claustrophobic reclusion is confirmed in the following scenes through the vision of a herd of horses riding in a framed space with seawater overflowing. In this case, "unintended intersemiotic tension" (p. 172) could not be avoided. Although the students were instructed to take the imagery into account—along with all the connotations and symbolism attached to it—the association between the horses visible on screen and the English word "nightmare" (night+mare) was irretrievably lost in the translation, since the Italian word for "horse" (*cavallo*) has no connections with "incubo," whose etymology (*incubus*) means "an overwhelming evil spirit."

8. Conclusion

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, subtitling short films for film festivals can be an extremely challenging, and therefore pedagogically valuable, experience in audiovisual translation training. Shorts are ideal didactic tools, as their tight narrative imposes flawless cohesion and at the same time provides room for experimental solutions in the storytelling that are also reflected in the dialogues and in all visual and auditory elements, both verbal and non-verbal ones. Unlike in lengthy feature films, metaphorical structure (Tsen, 2013) is often organised in the short film as one action pattern. Although systems of relations between different domains become cognitively accessible only when they are culturally consistent, to the point that metaphor can be considered as a model of operations of synthesis (Sobolev, 2008), the use of metaphor in experimental shorts tends to stress the presence of the intruder and the redesigning of familiar conceptualisations through creative conflictual combinations (Prandi, 2017).

Compared to monomodal verbal communication, in multimodal texts analogical juxtaposition (Pedersen, 2015) assumes the existence of a

metaphor-metonymy continuum. This wavering between the denotative and connotative levels conveyed through the dialogues and the visuals should constantly be taken into account in the translation of figurative language. The subtitles (not only dialogue captions, also credits and cards) should position themselves on the metaphor-metonymy cline so as to comply with the author's communicative intentions, avoiding too much explicitness and standardisation and, most of all, allowing intelligibility while preserving the viewer's space for interpretation.

Metaphors, especially when they are language-bound, may cause "translational crises" as well as "unintended intersemiotic tension" (Pedersen, 2015, p. 172) due to the interplay of different channels and to the technical constraints of the medium. These crises may be solved by resorting to various strategies (Lindqvist, 2002; Toury, 2012) and, ultimately (though this is not always possible) to the creative component that is inseparable from both metaphor (Kittay, 1989; Prandi, 2017) and its translation (Baumann, 2016).

Within the scope of this article only a limited number of case studies has been explored, chosen among different traditional subgenres, from documentary to poetry short films. Further research could be conducted on metaphors in short films according to subgenres, although it is important to underline that the challenges of subtitling short films is often the result of the difficulty of applying traditional categorisations to this type of audiovisual text, whose protean nature (Espasa, 2004) ultimately reflects that of metaphor itself.

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