

**GETTING BEYOND “READ ‘EM, QUICK!”
SOME PRACTICAL, SLOW NOTES
ON SUBTITLES AND SUPERIMPOSITIONS**

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SUBTITLES

IN GENERAL

The goal of a subtitle is for it to be “invisible” as *text* because it is felt to be *speech*.

This goal is difficult to achieve because subtitles are, in fact, texts read by viewers while they are disengaged to some degree from both the visuals and audio of a film. Given this disengagement--this pull-away--from the bodily presence of the film, the makers of subtitles—those texts-for-audience-performance—are faced with continual and difficult choices of where to position their work along the spectrum between translation *exactitude* and translation *impression*.

This basic positioning decision depends to some degree upon the length of the film:

- Short films are more likely to employ translation exactitude without risking audience fatigue.
- Long films, with their greater number of subtitles, are more likely to risk audience fatigue, withdrawal and even active resentment. Translation impression will diminish the number of words the viewer must read. The makers of a long film

requiring subtitles must advocate for the audience by placing the film appropriately along that spectrum between exactitude and impression.

SPATIAL PLACEMENT

Subtitles intrude into the visual space of a film. The tendency, therefore, is to place subtitles at the bottom border of TV-safe in order to keep the filmic space as clear as possible. The elements that determine if this subtitle placement is correct also have to do with how many subtitles the viewer will read, over what length of time, and how fast the subtitles will replace each other. Given a long, subtitle-heavy film, it is an option to aid the viewer by placing subtitles higher upon the screen in order to diminish the distance that the eye must jump from TV-safe to center-frame. This distance, over the course of a long film, risks fatiguing viewers to the extent that they stop reading the subtitles altogether, or, conversely, see little of the film *except* the subtitles.

TIME PLACEMENT

The ideal is for a subtitle to appear upon the screen at the exact moment that a person begins to speak, and, conversely, for the subtitle to disappear from the screen at the exact moment when the person ceases speaking. Complications such as short utterances, fast utterances, multiple utterances, gestures and sound within the environment often make this ideal impractical.

In solving all types of practical placement and exit problems, the filmmaker can be aided by cinematic perceptual *synaesthesia*. One example: if the last moment of utterance is too soon to exit its subtitle because the viewer

needs more time to actually read the subtitle, look for the gesture that can often accompany the cessation of an utterance and then extend the subtitle to exit at the end of that *gesture*. In such cases, the gesture will be felt as both a continuation of and a substitution for the voice *if* not too much time has elapsed between the cessation of the voice and the end or beginning of the gesture.

Time Placement Observations (in random order):

- Align the exit of a subtitle with the end of the voice utterance. If reading comprehension will suffer because of this coordination, then attempt to coordinate the exit by means of a gesture from the person who had just spoken. When words are aligned to gesture, time the exit of the subtitle to the dramatic closure of the gesture. Remember that the exit must then be coordinated rhythmically with any incoming subtitle.
- Sometimes subtitle duration can be linked to gaze—when the head turns or the eye blinks is often a good place to end the subtitle duration.
- Align subtitle to gesture or noticeable eye movement, whenever possible.
- When separating two subtitles by a dissolve, cut the exiting subtitle before the dissolve, otherwise the viewer will be reading the text which is stable and will likely miss the dissolve which is visually unstable and ephemeral but absolutely critical to understanding its usage as film grammar (usually, the passage of time). By the same amount of time that the exiting subtitle is cut before the dissolve, add that amount of time to the entering subtitle for rhythm match. This kind of situation also begs for a stylistic indicator such as a dash at the tail of the exiting subtitle and a balancing dash at the head of the entering subtitle.
- When one character asks another to repeat what they have just said, and it is something that has already been both said and subtitled, it is often effective to subtitle the second utterance, too, because it will give more time for the first to be digested and there is often a more complete dramatic gesture that accompanies the second utterance.
- It is best if there is blank space between utterances by two or more people in order to avoid confusion. If, however, you are highlighting the utterance of one character by means of a subtitle color that is stylistically known to “belong” to that person, then the lines can abut each other with little or no confusion.
- If a subtitle comes at the end of a shot, it is wise to keep that subtitle on the screen and extended to the very end of that shot and then cut both subtitle and shot by the change to the second shot rather than to risk a competing subtitle exit rhythm placed so close to the end of the shot and the beginning of the next shot.
- If a word in a spoken foreign language is either known or similar to the word used in the language of the subtitles, that word must be placed in a word-order where it can synch with the spoken utterance. For example, if the Spanish word “claro” is spoken at the

end of a sentence, then the English word “clear” should be the last word of that subtitle.

- It is better if the title or subtitle is terminated before panning or cutting. Said differently, use the commencement of a pan as the signal for the termination of a subtitle.
- When there are recognizable words or names in the foreign language, place them visually in the sentence closest to the time that the viewer while reading will *hear* that word or name.
- The smaller the amount of punctuation, the better. The audience often *feels* the trajectory of a sentence and does not have to be aided by punctuation. Take the use of the period punctuation, for example. Periods tend to be placed at the lower right corner of the visual frame; accordingly, they are visually extremely active. Because of the structure of the English language, we understand where a sentence is going before it is completely uttered—otherwise we would not be able to interrupt each other. An audience similarly understands when a sentence has finished without the use of concluding punctuation. I believe, therefore, that the use of periods and other punctuation is often not worth the visual intrusion into the diageic film-space.

SUBTITLING RITUALS

- It is most effective to align the duration of the subtitle to the duration of the ritual utterance. If the utterance is long with more than one phrase, extend the duration of the subtitles so there is no *visual* blank space between them. Assign visual blank space to the inhalation between ritual utterances.
- If the pace of ritual utterance is fast, you might decide that a double or triple line subtitle template would be best in order to signal, by means of that style, that the viewer has entered ritual space and that this space is demarcated from the rest of the film. If this type of subtitle style usage is chosen, it must then be extended to any other ritual situations throughout that film.

SUPERIMPOSITIONS

- It is common practice to wait for one “beat” before laying in a superimposition over a new scene. The rightness of that superimposition placement is increased if it is in synch with the beginning of a spoken utterance or any other noticeable sound (including background sound) from the film’s diageic sound environment.
- For a superimposition to be added to a shot in which a subtitle is already on the screen, it is rhythmically best if both elements exit the screen together.

The author:

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