

IRENE RANZATO  
(SAPIENZA UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-9128-850X

## REPRESENTING AND TRANSLATING ARTSPEAK IN FILMS AND TV

### ABSTRACT

The term “artspeak” was first popularised by art historian Robert Atkins (1990). According to those who are sceptic of the necessity and value of artspeak, its function has been little more than that of creating “a mystique surrounding the work of certain artists” (*ibidem*: ix). This suspicion towards the act of verbalising and conceptualising art is also reflected in the representation of artspeak in film and TV dialogue. This article offers some insights on the representation of artspeak in original and translated audiovisual dialogue focusing on a case study – the film *Velvet Buzzsaw* (2019) – in which the language of contemporary art has been believably represented.

KEYWORDS: audiovisual translation, artspeak, dubbing, subtitling, idiolects

## INTRODUCTION

When two couples meet in a contemporary art museum in the film *Manhattan* (Woody Allen 1979), Mary, one of the characters, explains to her interlocutors her appreciation for a piece of art: “To me it was very textural, you know what I mean? It was perfectly integrated and a marvellous kind of negative capability”. Isaac, played by Allen, evidently does not know what she means and is at first awed, then annoyed, then angry at the pseudo-intellectual gobbledygook. Even the Italian translator of the official subtitles felt the need to render her talk supposedly more intelligible and translated “textural” with *strutturale* (structural), a word with a whole new meaning, but more familiar to the average spectator. The Italian dubbing adaptor played a different card and rendered Mary’s speech even more obscure to the ears of the layman, by using the word *orditura*, a technical term related to textiles which in the language of contemporary art does not have the same meaning as textural.



Copyright © 2024. The Author. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are properly cited. The license allows for commercial use. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.

This anecdote encapsulates the uneasy relationship between audiovisual representations of contemporary art (and of its practitioners), the complexities of the language used to describe and analyse art works and the words used to translate it.

This article offers some insights on the representation of artspeak and the constructions of characters related to contemporary art in original and translated (English-Italian) audiovisual dialogue. The analysis is qualitative but the selection of dialogues has been based on the careful viewing and analysis of the comparatively few examples of meaningful ‘contemporary art characters’ in the history of cinema and television of the last thirty years, that is characters whose dialogue exchanges are quantitatively and qualitatively relevant.

After an introduction on ‘artspeak’, the distinctive idiolect of a community of practice, the questions that the analysis of films and TV shows has tried to answer are whether the respective characters could fall into the categories of stock characters and/or stereotypes, and whether any attempts have been made by the authors to make fictional artspeak sound realistic, taking into consideration also the translation of the respective dialogues into Italian (for dubbing and/or subtitling), which adds another layer of meaning to this already complex construct.

In the last section, I will concentrate on one film in particular and its translation for dubbing into Italian: *Velvet Buzzsaw* (Dan Gilroy 2019), which, at the time of writing, is still streaming on Netflix. Among all the films and TV shows that I have examined containing fictional characters who are either artists, art critics, gallerists or dealers, this film is the only one which features believable characters who are professionals of the contemporary art scene, in a story which is all about contemporary art. In addition, it relies heavily on dialogue for plot development and characterisation, thus providing material for the analysis which is difficult to find in other films and TV shows, in which art dealers and artists are often minor characters.

## ARTSPEAK: AN INEXPERT TRANSLATION

The concept that works of art should be explained verbally has long been debated, and even created some controversy, at least since Graeco-Roman antiquity (Harris 2003: viii). However, in spite of the existence of studies on the language and terminology of the arts at particular periods (e.g. Baxandall (1991) on the language of art criticism; Hausman (1991) on the use of figurative language in art history) and glossaries of words related to individual arts, no study has considered what Harris (2003: viii) defines as “the evolution of Western artspeak as a continuous multi-lingual development” nor attempted to analyse this discourse from the perspective of linguistic theory. More material can be found on artspeak from the points of view of diverse fields such as, for example, aesthetics and cognitive psychology, but some of the titles of the research papers reveal, in my opinion, the judgmental tenor of the analyses. The Cambridge University Press journal *Judgment and Decision Making*, for instance, recently published an essay titled “Bullshit Makes the Art Grow Profounder” (Turpin *et al.* 2023) which contains statements such as “in general, people find a lack of meaning aversive” (ivi: 658). Although the article is based on a study of computer-generated statements which are superficially profound-sounding but actually

meaningless (referred to as “pseudo-profound bullshit”), the introduction to the paper describes the very human experience of a visit to a modern art museum. My contention is that contemporary art seems to attract the revulsion and even the anger of all the people – either belonging to the ‘public’ or to the ‘academia’ – who are not familiar with its linguistic codes. Such aversion is by no means applied to any domain with such virulence as it is addressed to the jargon of contemporary art.

The term “artspeak” was first popularised by art historian Robert Atkins (1990). According to those who are sceptic of the necessity and value of artspeak, its function has been little more than that of creating “a mystique surrounding the work of certain artists” (ix). This is an opinion which we can arguably find shared by many of those who are not familiar with contemporary art, but even by many who do have an appreciation for art, who regularly and with enthusiasm visit galleries and museums and can derive various degrees of aesthetic pleasure from the works of contemporary art, but who do not necessarily value or understand the discourse about art.

This suspicion towards the act of verbalising and conceptualising art is also reflected in the representation of artspeak in film and TV dialogue. There seems to be at least one common code in representations of contemporary art on film: artists, and especially art critics, are most often portrayed as intellectual snobs with incomprehensible views and an even less comprehensible lingo. People using obscure codewords which do not mean anything to ordinary people who cannot relate to the language. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it can be affirmed that the language of contemporary art is the domain of the middle-to-upper middle class: not the aristocracy, not the working class, but specifically those belonging to the higher echelons of middle class interested in the arts:

Of this English upper-middle class speech we may note (a) that it is not localised in any one place, (b) that though the people who use this speech are not all acquainted with one another, they can easily recognise each other’s status by this index alone, (c) that this elite speech form tends to be imitated by those who are not of the elite, so that other dialect forms are gradually eliminated, (d) that the elite, recognising this imitation, is constantly creating new linguistic elaborations to mark itself off from the common herd (Leach, quoted by Rule, Divine 2013: 303).

In addition, the language of art has become estranged from ‘normal’ aesthetic categories: the author of this article remembers when in her early forays into the world of contemporary art she was advised not to use the expression “it’s beautiful” in reference to an artist’s work, but, for want of more specific knowledge, to prefer the words “it’s interesting”.

In spite of this distancing from ‘beauty’, Harris argues (x) that the language of art has been the realm of aestheticians rather than linguists, but that linguists should have the first say in the matter as artspeak has drawn upon many different languages, developing various specialised genres, and is congenitally multilingual. And even if nowadays, as Harris acknowledges (*ivi*: 123), the situation may be different, as the arts have taken their own linguistic turn, this enhanced awareness does not improve the clarity of this particular language.

According to the authors of an influential publication on what they term “International Art English” (IAE):

The internationalized art world relies on a unique language. Its purest articulation is found in the digital press release. This language has everything to do with English, but it is emphatically not English. It is largely an export of the Anglophone world and can thank the global dominance of English for its current reach. But what really matters for this language – what ultimately makes it a language – is the pointed distance from English that it has always cultivated (Rule, Levine 2013: 303).

The authors justify their use of the word “language” by defining first the speech community – or better, the community of practice – which uses it:

not just artists and curators, but gallery owners and directors, bloggers, magazine editors and writers, publicists, collectors, advisers, interns, art history professors, and so on. Art world is of course a disputed term, but the common alternative – art industry – doesn’t reflect the reality of IAE. If IAE were simply the set of expressions required to address a professional subject matter, we would hardly be justified in calling it a language (304).

As well as its relative obscurity, other features of this kind of speech may typically include recognisable lexical items such as ‘aporia’, ‘radically’, ‘space’, ‘proposition’, ‘bi-political’, ‘tension’, ‘transversal’, ‘autonomy’, ‘spatiality’, ‘potentiality’, ‘experiencability’, ‘fetishisation’; double adverbial terms (“playfully and subversively invert”); adjectival verb forms; past and present participles (Rule, Levine 2013: 305; Provan 2015: n.p.).

Dependent clauses are, according to Rule and Levine, one of the most common features of art-related writing. Also prominent is the pairing of like terms, whether in particular parts of speech (“internal psychology and external reality”) or entire phrases (Rule and Levine 2013: 306). In noting how art speech has a penchant for long phrases and dependent clauses, as well as on relying on too many words rather than few, one can recognise a tendency of academic writing in some European languages such as Italian, as opposed to English.

The two scholars ask themselves: how did we end up writing in a way that sounds like inexpertly translated French? (*ivi*: 309), and they trace the origin of this influence in the art criticism journal *October*, founded in 1976. Seeking more rigorous interpretive criteria for art criticism, the editors and collaborators of this journal were led to translate and introduce many French poststructuralist texts to English-speaking readers. According to Rule and Levine,

the shift in criticism represented by *October* had an enormous impact on the interpretation and evaluation of art and also changed the way writing about art sounded (...) The mysterious proliferation of definite and indefinite articles – “the political”, “the space of absence”, “the recognizable and the repulsive” – are also French imports (*ivi*: 309–310).

According to the scholars, many features of IAE are specific to the highbrow written French that “the poststructuralists appropriated or in some cases parodied”, elevating translation misunderstandings or mistakes to the level of linguistic norms (*ivi*: 310). *October*, which also received important influences from German as well as French, sounded “seriously translated” (*ivi*: 310) from its first very first issue and, very soon, much of the art world sounded similar and adopted this élite language. In sum, artspeak (like ‘dubbese’,

the language of dubbing) is a ‘language’ born from translation, it is the result of loan and calques sometimes unwittingly, sometimes consciously perpetrated, also because their origin was prestigious.

By analysing patterns of linguistic usage of press releases in the online journal and curatorial platform *e-flux* over a span of thirteen years, Alix Rule and David Levine examined the stylistic tendencies of International Art English and concluded that, in terms of the most common items used:

An artist’s work inevitably interrogates, questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces – though often it doesn’t do these things so much as it serves to, functions to, or seems to (or might seem to) do these things [...]. Space is an especially important word in IAE and can refer to a raft of entities not traditionally thought of as spatial (the space of humanity) as well as ones that are in most circumstances quite obviously spatial (the space of the gallery) (Rule, Levine 2013: 305).

It is a language which can certainly attract the critique of more populist commentators:

Meanwhile, the word “space” is offered up way too often. Art folk tend to say, “that’s a great space,” when surely they just mean “that’s a great studio” or “that’s a good gallery”. And don’t get me started on the verbs “to critique”, “to contextualise” and “to interrogate”, which get thrown about copiously, too, along with talk of “strategies”, “projection”, “commodification”, “assimilation”, “appropriation” and “the other”. Issues are endlessly “raised”. Sculptures “hover” between something and something else, while “examining” issues of immense social significance (Jones 2018).

To make matters more complicated, the development of conceptual art (see artist Joseph Kosuth’s seminal 1969 manifesto, but also earlier work by critics such as Clement Greenberg) introduced a new era in the relationship between the work of art and relative verbal comment and encouraged the emergence of an art which is prevalently language-based, which thus makes of artspeak part of the artistic process rather than a comment upon it:

Conceptualism ushered in a new era in the relations between the work of art and verbal comment about it. Words, under the new dispensation, became essential in the recognition of a product of artistic creativity, where the product itself could be neither heard nor seen. This move in practice promoted art theory to a position of superiority with respect to the production of art (Harris 2003: 125).

Finally, Harris (*ivi*: 161) importantly states: “Artspeak thus emerges as a powerful instrument in moulding public perception of the arts, rather than a mere reflection of current views”.

The common “perception of the arts” is what we see represented on film and television screens. Whether in a comedy or in other genres, it is very rare to see contemporary artists and/or art critics and gallery owners portrayed differently from over the top, obscure snobs who seem to enjoy speaking an élite code which is largely the result of a translation process.

## ART ON SCREEN

In this section, I will refer to some of the comparatively few films and TV shows which feature key characters who engage in ‘artspeak’. I have excluded biopics of famous artists because my interest lies in the construction of a fictional type or stereotype, and the language used to characterise him or her. The stories which see them as protagonists or important characters are films and episodes with a plot or subplot revolving around the world of contemporary art.

Contemporary art and its practitioners have often been represented on screen but, apart from biographies of ‘real’ artists (Pollock, Bacon, Kahlo, Basquiat, Warhol, to mention just a few), the most frequent perspective from which the contemporary art world has been depicted is either comedic or related to crime investigation. Contemporary artists, critics, curators, gallerists, dealers, and connoisseurs are most often fictionally portrayed – exactly like Mary in the *Manhattan* dialogue quoted in the introduction – as stuffy, pretentious and arid intellectuals whose lives are separated from those of ordinary mortals by a gulf. The exceptions are indeed rare and make one reflect on how little the language of contemporary art has ever truly penetrated a more mainstream discourse, thus remaining, with some consistency over the decades, a useful tool for parodic characterisation.

As *The Simpsons* (Matt Groening, 1989 – in production) feeds on parodies, one cannot but open this brief review with a reference to an episode of its 10th season, entitled “Mom and The Pop Art”. While Homer and Marge visit The Art Museum of Springfield, Marge explains some of the art contained in it (including a Warhol painting of a canned soup and an Oldenburg pencil sculpture) to a puzzled but admiring Homer: “These guys are geniuses. I could never think of something like soup or a pencil” (*The Simpsons*, season 10, episode 9). The episode focuses on Homer who, failing to build a barbecue, can only manage a heap of bricks, cement and trash. The ‘sculpture’ is seen by an art dealer and considered an expression of contemporary art: “Our art is not just pretty pictures. It’s an expression of raw human emotion. In your case: rage” (*ibidem*). When Marge expresses her surprise, the dealer explains: “Your husband’s work is what we call ‘outsider art’. It could be by a mental patient or a hillbilly or a chimpanzee” (*ibidem*). The episode quotes several iconic artists and works of the history of art and is a humorous critique of the contemporary art system.

Notable depictions of the art world which, though still using humour to enhance characterisation, manage not to fall into the trap of worn-out clichés, are the film *Untitled* (Jonathan Parker 2009), a humorous account of the commercial as well as artistic aspects of the industry; the internet sitcom *Whole Day Down* (Patrick Green and Tai Fauci 2011–2015), the story of two out-of-work actors who open a gallery and start a challenging new career as curators; and the controversial satirical drama *The Square*, a film by the Swedish director Ruben Ostlund (2017), which won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival. The latter work plays with stereotypes surrounding the art industry and includes a disturbing 12-minute “monkey scene” by a conceptual artist who at first amuses and then terrorises the Swedish art élite.

As well as in the film *Manhattan*, evoked in the introduction, other films of Woody Allen feature artists and art dealers. Two more down-to-earth characters than the affected snobs that are most of the characters mentioned so far can be seen in *You Will Meet a Tall Dark*

*Stranger* (2010), in which the character of Greg Clemente, played by Antonio Banderas, is the owner of an art gallery, and Sally, one of the protagonists of the film, played by Naomi Watts, works for him before trying to open her own gallery. In *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995), Helena Bonham Carter plays the role of the ambitious art curator Amanda Sloan. In *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008) two of the main characters are contemporary artists, as are the many historical characters met by the protagonist in *Midnight in Paris* (2011). *Match Point* (2006) and *A Rainy Day in New York* (2019) both feature important scenes in museums and galleries. Allen's witty dialogue exchanges in these films, however, are rarely related to art. It is *Play It Again, Sam* (Herbert Ross 1972, based on a play by Woody Allen) which contains a memorable dialogue that hints at the bleak opaqueness of artspeak:

PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM

Sam: It's quite a lovely Jackson Pollock, isn't it?

Girl: Yes, it is.

Sam: What does it say to you?

Girl: It restates the negativity of the universe. The hideous, lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of a man forced to live in a barren, godless eternity like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror and degradation forming a useless, bleak straightjacket in a black absurd cosmos.

Sam: What are you doing Saturday night?

Girl: Committing suicide.

Sam: What about Friday night?

In 1991 Woody Allen directed five TV commercials for Coop, a big network of Italian supermarkets. To my knowledge, these short clips (rarely seen today and available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhekG0-0S7A>) have never been disseminated in the original language, but only in the Italian dubbed versions. In one of them, a group of 'snotty' intellectuals, presumably art critics or art enthusiasts, study and discuss the 'works of art' which are none other than pieces of meat installed in display cases or showy props:

"COOP" TV COMMERCIAL – Italian dubbed dialogue

A: È un genio. Sai, lavora esclusivamente la carne.

B: Manzo.

A: Sì, guarda che splendore di linee e forme. Come rispecchia la società contemporanea.

C: Ti dice qualcosa?

A: Che l'uomo moderno è ciò che mangia.

B: In quel macinato sento vibrare tutta la nostra crisi esistenziale.

C: Si percepisce l'intero rapporto tra l'uomo e il cosmo sprigionarsi da questa bistecca, vero?

A: È genio, genio puro. Mai vista una tale eloquenza con il vitello.

B: Sublime. Costolette postmoderne.

VOICE OVER: La qualità è un'arte e la Coop firma col proprio marchio solo le carni selezionate e controllate con cura.

“COOP” TV COMMERCIAL – literal translation

A: She’s a genius. You know, she works exclusively with meat.

B: Beef.

A: Yes, look at those amazing lines and shapes. How they reflect contemporary society.

C: What does it say to you?

A: That modern man is what he eats.

B: In that minced meat I feel all our existential crisis vibrating.

C: One perceives the whole relationship between mankind and cosmos springing from that steak, right?

A: It’s genius, pure genius. Never seen such eloquence with lamb.

B: Sublime. Postmodern ribs.

VOICE OVER: Quality is an art and Coop signs with its trademark only selected and carefully checked meats.



Figure 1: Woody Allen Coop commercial for Italian TV (1991)

Relatively recent TV series have also included substantial characters and references to the art world, when their plot is not wholly revolving around the theme: *Riviera* (Neil Jordan, 2017–2020), a series about art collectors with disappointingly little art dialogue; *I Love Dick* (Sarah Gubbins and Jill Soloway, 2016–2017, based on the novel by Chris Kraus) which takes place in the iconic Texas city of Marfa, the centre of minimalist art that attracts visitors from all over the world; *Sex and the City* (Darren Star 1998–2004) in which the character of Charlotte York works as an art dealer; *Divorce* (Sharon Horgan 2016–2019) where the main character opens an art gallery after her separation; *Girls* (Lena Dunham 2012–2017) in which another character, Marnie, also works in an art gallery and in which a contemporary artist, the pretentious Booth Jonathan, features prominently in several episodes. Also Bette Porter, one of the protagonists of a famous older series, *The L Word* (Ilene Chaiken *et al.* 2004–2009), is a powerful, Ivy League-educated director of an art museum. Currently streaming on Apple TV, the series *Presumed Innocent* (David E.



Kelley 2024), also features a prominent character who works in an art gallery. However, as in other instances, examples of artspeak in these series are very sparse and the storylines are mainly focused on personal relationships.

In most of the stories that these telecinematic texts narrate, the relationship between art and money frequently surfaces and the subtext is that the sums that these works of art are worth seem disproportionate to the eyes of the layman. This is evident in some of Charlotte York's (*Sex and the City*) or Marnie's (*Girls*) interactions with the artists they meet, or in a sequence from the second season of *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner 2007–2015). Still non-parodic but clearly showcasing the incomprehensibility of contemporary art, in an episode of the latter a canvas by Mark Rothko puzzles most of the characters who work in an advertisement agency in the 1950s:

#### MAD MEN Season 2 Episode 7

Ken: It's abstract expressionist.

Harry: What the hell does that mean? [...]

Salvatore: It's a Rothko. Why the hell didn't Dale say that?

Harry: \$ 10,000.

Jane: So it's smudgy squares. That's interesting.

Harry: Two possibilities. Either Cooper loves it, and you have to love it. Like in an Emperor New Clothes situation. Or he thinks it's a joke, and you'll look like a fool if you pretend to dig it.

Salvatore: People like him pretend they understand this.

Harry: Maybe he has a brochure in here, something that explains it.

Ken: I don't think it's supposed to be explained.

The contemporary artist seen, at best, as an outsider, is also reflected from a linguistic point of view in *The Affair* (Sarah Treem, Hagai Levi 2014–2019). In this successful drama series, the artist Farkut, a prominent character, is portrayed as a pretentious, odious seducer of young women with a predictable British accent. The 'villain' type as a British English speaker in an American context is a well-known topos of film and TV narratives (see among others Ranzato 2018: 223) and, in this case, contributes to depict contemporary art and those involved in it as something alien and remote from 'normality'.

Even if many of the narratives I referenced mimic reality and, apart from the downright comedies, are not meant to be overtly parodic, they are unfortunately all missed opportunities of hearing characters 'artspeak'. In the following section I will look at the only film among the audiovisual products that I have examined, which, although always balancing on the brink of comedic artificiality, contains believable characters and dialogue exchanges, and revolves in its entirety around the industry of contemporary art, exploring it from different points of views.

## TRANSLATING ARTSPEAK: THE CASE OF *VELVET BUZZSHAW*

The translation of the idiolect of various speech communities has been the topic of several investigations in audiovisual translation. See for example, only for the case of dubbing, Ranzato (2012), Sandrelli (2016) and Passa (2021) on the dubbing of ‘gayspeak’; and Vitucci (2023), Ranzato (2015, forthcoming 2024), and Zanotti (2016) for the translation ‘teen speak’ and ‘youth speech’. However, no study has been carried out on the translation of fictional artspeak, arguably because, as I have illustrated, films and TV shows which feature extensive dialogue spoken by characters belonging to the art world are comparatively few. The film *Velvet Buzzsaw* (Dan Gilroy 2019) is an exception.

*Velvet Buzzsaw* is a thriller and a satire of the world of contemporary art produced by Netflix. The plot and the characters are all related to this central topic. This “silly-but-energetic” film, as *The Guardian* has termed it (Lee 2019: “It’s a mess, but a mostly enjoyable one, wildly careering between farce and frights, never risking boredom along the way”), is a humorous but believable portrayal of various aspects of the contemporary art industry. Set in Los Angeles, it is mostly concerned with the hype and the money generated by ‘bankable’ artists, and with the rich collectors willing to spend huge sums on artworks. Jake Gyllenhaal plays the main role of Morf Vanderwalt, a famous art critic who can make or break artists’ reputations. Being the only film rich in dialogue related to contemporary art, my aim has been to ascertain the presence of an idiolect similar to what we have come to understand as ‘artspeak’, a lingo which would stand apart from unmarked natural conversation, and to verify how the translation performed for the Italian dubbing adaptation has rendered this way of speaking.

The very first dialogue exchange, between Morf and a curator during a collective art show, sets the tone of the film:

### VELVET BUZZSHAW (2019)

Original dialogue	Italian dubbing	Back translation
Claudio: It’s Kenji, as you probably know. It’s titled “Hoboman”. The response is amazing. Arguably the hit of the show.	Claudio: È di Kenji, come già saprai. Si chiama “Senzatetto” e sta avendo molto successo. Forse il pezzo più forte della mostra.	Claudio: It’s Kenji, as you probably already know. It’s called “Hoboman” and is having great success. Perhaps the strongest piece of the show.
Morf: Mmm. Wolfson, “Female figure”, four years ago.	Morf: Wolfson, “Figura di donna”, quattro anni fa.	Morf: Wolfson, “Woman figure”, four years ago.
Claudio: No, it’s new, vastly different themes.	Claudio: Ma no, questa ha un tema diverso.	Claudio: Well no, this has a different theme.
Morf: It’s an iteration. No originality. No courage. My opinion.	Morf: È una ripetizione, non c’è originalità. Neanche coraggio. Per me.	Morf: It’s a repetition, there is no originality. Nor courage. For me.

Original dialogue	Italian dubbing	Back translation
Claudio: Well, I absolutely respect the power of your point of view, but this encompasses on a global scale, there's such a sense of now and in-yer-face, which speaks to pop and cinema and economics. I mean, you can feel the winds of the apocalypse. We have a four-million-dollar hold, a major buyer in Shanghai. Will you be running your review today?	Claudio: Beh io rispetto il tuo illustre punto di vista, ma devi vederlo su scala globale, sentire quello che ti trasmette. Parla di pop, cinema e di economia. Ti fa sentire i venti dell'apocalisse. Un acquirente di Shanghai vuole acquistarlo per quattro milioni di dollari. Lo scrivi oggi l'articolo?	Claudio: Well, I respect your distinguished point of view, but you have to see it on a global scale, feel what it transmits to you. It is about pop, cinema and economics. It makes you feel the winds of the apocalypse. A buyer from Shanghai wants to buy it for four million dollars. Will you write the article today?

The language used by the two men can be acknowledged as a recognisable form of artspeak: the Latinate word (“iteration”), hyperbolic expressions (“the response is amazing”, “you can feel the winds of the apocalypse”), the emphasis on originality and the insistence on the monetary aspect of art achieve verisimilitude. The Italian translation shows early signs of trying to simplify the discourse, diminishing the effect of artspeak: the phrase “sta avendo molto successo” ([It]is having a great success) tones down the effect of the original “The response is amazing”; the word “iteration” is translated with the more prosaic “ripetizione” (repetition); and the expression “in-yer-face”, often used in art, cinema and the theatre, for example, to describe something bold and provocative, is omitted in translation. Interestingly, in the subtitles (which often offer, generally speaking, a more literal translation than dubbing), “iterative” is translated with “iterativo” and “in-yer-face” with the more suitable “c’è un senso di attualità e affronto” (there is a sense of topicality and affront).

In a brief open-air scene at the same art show, we witness a recurrent feature of Italian dubbing adaptations: the tendency to fill up with invented dialogue moments of silence or in which the dialogue is not perceptible (see Ranzato 2020). On the image of a work of art which emits smoke, the audience can hear distinctly the words “Quest’anno si sono inventati la cosa del fumo” (this year they invented the smoke thing) which is not present in the source text and replaces background noise and voices. “Italian audiences [...] are deemed by certain professionals in the field to be extremely intolerant of long silences, to the point of suggesting the addition of entirely new dialogue in the target version” (*ivi*: 652–654).

Talking to another curator, Morf uses technical terms and themes which are recurrent in contemporary art speech:

#### VELVET BUZZSHAW (2019)

Original dialogue	Italian dubbing	Back translation
Rhodora: Well?	Rhodora: Beh?	Rhodora: Well?
Morf: Colour. Life. I love it.	Morf: Colore. Vita. Mi piace.	Morf: Colour. Life. I like it.
Rhodora: I’m sick of white spaces.	Rhodora: Gli spazi bianchi mi hanno stancata.	Rhodora: I’ve grown out of white spaces.

Original dialogue	Italian dubbing	Back translation
Morf: That is so strange. I've been drawn to a bolder booth presence in terms of work and palette lately.	Morf: Ah ma che strano. Ultimamente mi attraggono rappresentazioni con dei colori molto audaci.	Morf: Ah how strange. Lately I've been drawn to representations with much bolder colours.
Rhodora: Mm-hmm. This adherence to showing sterile, monochrome cubes, it's just laziness. I wanted to get some juxtaposition going.	Rhodora: L'abitudine di esporre in cubi sterili e monocromatici è un segno di pigrizia. Io volevo che si staccassero dalla parete.	Rhodora: The habit of exhibiting in sterile and monochrome cubes is a sign of laziness. I wanted them to stick out of the wall.

“Booth presence” is an expression which refers to the space that curators and galleries occupy at art fairs and exhibitions. The words “palette” (usually referred to a rich range of colours), and “monochrome cube” (supposedly very trendy art spaces, usually painted white or in other monochrome colours) contribute to convey the linguistic aura of art professionals. By omitting a translation for “booth presence”, the Italian adaptation ultimately misinterprets Morf’s words, which in the target text are referred to the works of art and not the space which contains them.

As mentioned earlier, all the characters in the film are professionally involved in contemporary art, thus they all speak with a certain measure of artspeak. See for example the dialogue between the Dutch art dealer John Dondon and the artist Piers, played by John Malkovich:

#### VELVET BUZZSHAW (2019)

Original dialogue	Italian dubbing	Back translation
Jon Dondon: The market always tiers up for you, Piers.	Jon Dondon: Il mercato stravede per te, Piers.	Jon Dondon: The market dotes on you, Piers.
Piers: Listen, my tolerance for your bullshit is zero.	Piers: La mia tolleranza alle tue lusinghe è pari a zero.	Piers: My tolerance for your flattering is equal to zero.
Jon Dondon: <i>Lekker</i> , no bullshit. Look, Rhodora overpriced you. She's lost it, she's completely out of touch. I sold <i>Cranial</i> today for three point seven, exactly what I said I'd get. If you come with me, our gallery has cutting-edge analytics to maximise deal flow and global demand.	Jon Dondon: Non lusinghe, complimenti. Ascolta, Rhodora ha sopravvalutato i tuoi quadri. Ha perso il contatto con la realtà. Oggi ho venduto <i>Cranial</i> a 3 e 7, esattamente il prezzo stabilito. Se vieni con me, la nostra galleria è all'avanguardia e può aumentare le opportunità di investimento.	Jon Dondon: Not flattering, compliments. Listen, Rhodora overvalued your paintings. She has lost touch with reality. Today I sold <i>Cranial</i> for three point seven, exactly the established prize. If you come with me, our gallery is cutting-edge and can increase the opportunities for investment.

The omission of Dondon’s codeswitching to his native language (“lekker”) is again a missed opportunity to characterise an idiolect in the Italian target text. The world of art is international by definition and codeswitching is often used to characterise the people who work in it. In addition, the last line reiterates the direct link between contemporary art and the language of economics. The manipulation of the real meaning of the last phrase renders the financial discourse banal and ultimately devoid of real sense: “If you come with me, our gallery has cutting-edge analytics to maximise deal flow and global demand”, says Dondon in the original line, but the Italian translation, back-translated, sounds as “If you come with

me, our gallery is cutting-edge and can increase the opportunities for investment” which refers to something different and turns out to be less effective in terms of characterisation.

As a final example of a translation of screen dialogue which in the original manages to achieve believable linguistic portrayals of contemporary art professionals, I will quote this short exchange:

#### VELVET BUZZSHAW (2019)

Original dialogue	Italian dubbing	Back translation
Morf: I assess out of adoration. I further the realm I analyse.	Morf: Io recensisco per passione. E promuovo quel reame che analizzo.	Morf: I review for passion. And I promote that kingdom that I analyse.

The translation into Italian perpetuates the widespread tendency to calques – particularly recurrent in the dubbing realised by streaming platforms such as Netflix. In this case the literal translation of the word “realm” with “reame” (“realm” in the sense of kingdom, but not in the metaphorical sense of “topic”) makes for a very awkward translation and one which does not do justice to the sophisticated language of the art critic Morf and of his peers.

## CONCLUSIONS

After an introduction on the controversial language of contemporary art, in which I traced the origin of the term “artspeak” and its most relevant features, this article has offered some insights on the representation of this idiolect, which characterises a specific community of practice, and the representations of fictional characters related to contemporary art, both in original and translated (English-Italian) audiovisual dialogues. I have deliberately excluded biopics of real artists, because my main aim was the analysis of the construction of a fictional type.

Further research, however, would undoubtedly benefit from a contrastive analysis of the speech of purely fictional characters and those based on real-life people. It would also contribute to make the corpus richer, because films and TV shows which feature artists, art critics, gallerists and art dealers as protagonists or key characters are comparatively few, and the way they speak makes one reflect on how little the language of contemporary art has ever truly penetrated a more mainstream discourse, thus remaining mainly a useful tool for parodic characterisation.

The last part of the analysis has focused on the only recent film which, being centred exclusively on the contemporary art industry, could offer some insights on the representation of artspeak and its translation. The analysis of *Velvet Buzzshaw* has shown how an overall believable idiolect, such as that created for its characters, was not rendered in Italian in a way which could suitably convey the sophisticated, intellectual, artificial, but ultimately creative language of contemporary art practitioners.

The real interest of artspeak however lies in the fact that, according to the scholars whose views have been illustrated in the first part of this article, artspeak is a code of speech which results from translation, and one which has made ample use of loans and calques from

a romance language. It would therefore be interesting to explore further the journey that the translation of artspeak, as represented in fictional dialogue, but also in natural speech, has made back into other romance languages.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ATKINS R. (1990): *Artspeak*, Abbeville, New York.
- BAXANDALL M. (1991): *The Language of Art Criticism*, in: KEMAL S., GASKELL I. (eds.), *The Language of Art History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 67–75.
- HARRIS R. (2003): *The Necessity of Artspeak: The Language of the Arts in the Western Tradition*, Continuum, London and New York.
- HAUSMAN C. R. (1991): *Figurative Language in Art History*, in: KEMAL S., GASKELL I. (eds.), *The Language of Art History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 101–128.
- JONES L. (2018): *You What? Why Artspeak Is More Impenetrable Than the Art It Is Trying to Explain*, “The Telegraph”, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/art/artists/artspeak-impenetrable-art-trying-explain/>.
- LEACH E. R. (1954): *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*, Bell, London.
- LEE B. (2019): *Velvet Buzzsaw review – Netflix art world horror is flawed but fun*, “The Guardian”, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/jan/28/velvet-buzzsaw-review-netflix-art-world-horror-is-flawed-but-fun>.
- PASSA D. (2021): “*We Work Hard, We Play Hard!*” — *Fictional Gayspeak in the Italian Dubbing of “The Simpsons”*: A *Queer Audiovisual Translation Study*, “Iperstoria”, 17: 265–280.
- PROVAN A. (2015): *Chronicle of a Traveling Theory*, in: CORNELL L., HALTER E. (eds.), *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts; reprinted online: Triple Canopy, December 21, 2015: <https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/chronicle-of-a-traveling-theory>.
- RANZATO I. (2012): *Gayspeak and Gay Subjects in Audiovisual Translation: Strategies in Italian Dubbing*, “Meta”, 57/2: 369–384.
- RANZATO I. (2015): *Dubbing Teenage Speech into Italian: Creative Translation in Skins*, in: DÍAZ CINTAS J., NEVES J. (eds.), *Audiovisual Translation: Taking Stock*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge: 159–175.
- RANZATO I. (2018): *The British Upper Classes Phonological Fact and Screen Fiction*, in: RANZATO I., ZANOTTI S. (eds.), *Linguistic and Cultural Representation in Audiovisual Translation*, Routledge, London and New York: 203–227.
- RANZATO I. (2020): *The Problem with Culture*, in: BOGUCKI L., DECKERT M. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*, Palgrave Macmillan, London: 647–666.
- RANZATO I. (forthcoming 2024): *And Quickly Does it Flee: The Transient Language of Teen TV Series and its Translation*, in: BORODO M., DÍAZ CINTAS J. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Children’s Literature and Media*, Routledge, London and New York.
- RULE A., LEVINE D. (2013): *International Art English*, “Triple Canopy”, [https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english?ui.header=true](https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english?ui.header=true): 303–318.
- SANDRELLI S. (2016): *The Dubbing of Gay-themed TV Series in Italy: Corpus-based Evidence of Manipulation and Censorship*, “Altre Modernità, special issue: DÍAZ CINTAS J., PARINI I., RANZATO I. (eds.), *Ideological Manipulation in Audiovisual Translation*: 124–143.

- TURPIN M. H., WALKER A. C., KARA-YAKOUBIAN M., GABERT N. N., FUGELSANG J. A., STOLZ J. A. (2019): *Bullshit Makes the Art Grow Profounder*, "Judgment and Decision-Making", 14/6: 658–670.
- VITUCCI F. (2023): *Representation of Masculine Speech in the Japanese Dub of the American Series Never Have I Ever (2020): Fictional Idiolects or Linguistic Experimentation?*, "Status Questionis", 24: 329–351.
- ZANOTTI S. (2016): *Images of Youth on Screen: Manipulative Translation Strategies in the Dubbing of American Teen Films*, in: DÍAZ CINTAS J., PARINI I., RANZATO I. (eds.), "Ideological Manipulation in Audiovisual Translation. Special issue of *Altre Modernità – Rivista di studi letterari e culturali*", 14: 144–165.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- The Affair* (2014–2019). Created by Treem S., Levi, H., USA.
- Divorce* (2016–2019). Created by Horgan S., USA.
- Girls* (2012–2017). Created by Dunham L., USA.
- I Love Dick* (2016–2017). Created by Gubbins S., Soloway S., USA.
- The L Word* (2004–2009). Created by Chaiken I., Abbott M., Greenberg K., USA.
- Mad Men* (2007–2015). Created by Weiner M., USA.
- Manhattan* (1979). Directed by Allen W., USA.
- Match Point* (2006). Directed by W. Allen, USA.
- Midnight in Paris* (2011). Directed by Allen W., USA.
- Mighty Aphrodite* (1995). Directed by Allen W., USA.
- Play It Again, Sam* (1972). Directed by Ross, H., USA.
- A Rainy Day in New York* (2019). Directed by Allen W., USA.
- Riviera* (2017–2020). Created by Jordan N., UK, Ireland.
- Sex and the City* (1998–2004). Created by Star D., USA.
- The Simpsons* (1989–in production). Created by Groening M., USA.
- The Square* (2017). Directed by Ostlund R., Sweden, Germany, France, Denmark.
- Untitled* (2009). Directed by Parker J., USA.
- Velvet Buzzsaw* (2019). Directed by Gilroy D., USA.
- Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008). Directed by Allen W., USA.
- Whole Day Down* (2011–2015). Created by Green P., Fauci T., USA.
- Woody Allen-Spot Coop* (1991). Directed by Allen W., USA.
- You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger* (2010). Directed by Allen W., USA.

