THE CAT'S MEOW

"TOP CAT's" Dubbed Life as "DON GATO"

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Introduction –

Mexican audiences received with excitement the much-anticipated 2011 animated feature "Don Gato y su Pandilla," a film based on the 1961 Hanna-Barbera (HB) series "Top Cat (TC)." As with many of HB shows, TP was inspired by a 1955 sitcom "Sgt. Bilko" where the main character is an unsuccessful con man who continuously tries to profit from his situation in the Army. TC is a smooth talker, goodhearted moneymaking schemer, who leads a misfit Manhattan-based cat-gang conformed by Benny the Ball, Choo-Choo, Brain, Fancy-Fancy, and Spook.

When in 1957 Joseph Barbera and Bill Hanna established the HB studio, they had been working together for more than 20 years, winning seven academy awards for their Tom and Jerry animated shorts (MGM) in the 1940s. Their experience allowed them to create a limited animation style adapted to the technical and economic constraints dictated by television[1]. In HB cartoons, the emphasis was less on visual sophistication than on comic writing. Their short features [2] relied on stylized characters shown mostly through close-ups highlighting their mechanical mouth and eye movements as sole indicators of facial expressions; the characters acquired personality through voice and dialogue (catch-phrases, jokes, and puns, articulated with typical accents and rhythmic intonations). William Hannah stated that their character design strove for "a pleasing and congenial appearance whose personality might be likened to the charisma of a live action actor" (92). In his seminal analysis of American cartoons, Paul Wells concludes that HB's predictable and consistent characters had the potential to become placeholders for simple ideological, ethical, or moral archetypes. This configuration answered Americans' quest for individuality, one that relied on finding external embodiments of their main values.

Top Cat was the most dialogue heavy of all HB series. Because it was New Yorker Joe Barbera's pet-project, he bequeathed the characters a very distinctive Brooklyn accent. Although clever, the dialogue did not offer much comedic attraction and failed to grasp the interest of the targeted audience. Barbera later acknowledged, "We might as well have been doing live action. There were no cartoon sight gags" (Barbera 145). In the end, only 30 episodes of TC were produced—whereas HB's previous success, the Flintstones, ran for 166 episodes.

When syndicated in the 1970s, the cartoon became an international success, particularly in México where it was translated, adapted and dubbed into Spanish as "Don Gato y su pandilla," (that is) "Mr. Cat and his gang." A creative team of translator and voice actors supplemented the original imagery with dialogue structured around Mexican references and idioms, articulated in typical accents. As a case study, "Don Gato (DG)" illustrates how Latin American countries manage to appropriate mainstream products for the dissemination of regional content. In spite of the American setting and characters, DG was such a success that it is still a popular icon today as the 2011 movie exemplifies. In this paper we argue that the success relied on two main features: first, the adaptation and dubbing[3] that transformed the cats into relatable local characters; and second, on the cats' marginal condition that made them attractive to the Mexican audience. By calling attention to animation as an audiovisual form, our paper offers avenues for future research on the phenomenological weight of VOICE in animation.

Sound and image –

Since the 1980s film theory has highlighted cinema as a heterogeneous form that compounds two *technico-sensorial*[4] units: sound and image. Whereas the 2D images are constrained to a screen frame, sound waves disseminate in space enveloping the public. Because of this disparity, the film industry had to develop strategies to habituate audiences to perceive sound as originating from the images. In cinema, sounds ask where and the image replies 'here.[5]' The outcome of this process depended on audiences' exposure to, and use of, different languages, and the nature of each culture. One of the salient synch-points is the articulating mouth: where voice and image, or sound and visual information, converge. According to Michel Chion: *The physical nature of film necessarily makes an incision or cut between the body and the voice. Then the cinema does its best to restitch the two together at the seam.[6]"*

[1] Deprived of the large format and crisp qualities, the image becomes secondary in quality to sound, making the experience for the audience an aural-dependent experience, similar to radio years before.

[2] signature style

[3] Dubbing in our case study is the postproduction technique that both translates the voice into another language/culture and synchronizes voice and image.

[4] Doan (575A) // Analysis before Chion

[5] Elsaesser

[6] From: the voice that seeks a body

Although heterogeneous, sound and image in cinema are *indexical* traces of the actors' performance. Conversely, animation is *ontologically hybrid* because the voice retains its *indexicality* while the image is fabricated. In this cinematic form, the voice has a heavier responsibility in providing volume, depth, and *ontic legitimacy* to the image, as well as personality to the characters. In the production process, image is structured and timed according to sound. This determines some of the restrictions and difficulties of dubbing where the process is inverted and the voice has to fit within a pre-established visual sequence.

Dubbing and post-colonial theory–

Dubbing into another language is a postproduction technique with two steps: adaptation and voice acting. The first step, adaptation, is a mode of translation[7] that entails some form of re-creation in order to adjust the meaning of the original text to the culture of the targeted audience. Creative adaptation is crucial when translating humor for TV, as the comedic effect is far more important than literal fidelity. So much so, that in 1961, **Thomas L. Rowe** wrote that "The dubbing of comedy requires above all a writer capable of writing a funny line in his own language." Furthermore, the restriction to fit the text into the original visual sequence increases the freedom of the writer to find equivalencies and nonliteral expressions.

The second step, voice acting, is the embodiment of the adapted script. In order to better understand the problem of dubbing animation into other languages, it is useful to remember that the voice, as philosopher, Adriana Caravero explains, is essentially split. The scholar differentiates **orality** (the functioning of the voice as the bearer of language) from **vocality** (the activities and values belonging to the voice as such, independently of language). Vocality, as the material creation of the voice, makes each utterance unique. **(present example)**[8] The oral dimension of voice acting deals with the translated text. The vocal dimension involves the timbre, pitch, the particular "grain," and we would add, the inflections of the voice of the actors embodying the characters. Like in adaptation, voice acting in dubbing also provides opportunities for improvisational creativity in the vocal dimension.

The Mexican team that worked on DG was lead by Rubén Arvizu, who was in charge of the script's adaptation, and his brother Jorge Arvizu, who lent his voice to two of the most memorable characters, Benny the Ball and Choo-Choo.

Rubén Arvizu's writing skills shine from the start. In the first episode, after finding a suitcase full of money, TC claims possession invoking "the law of finder's keepers." Arvizu applied an equivalent idiomatic expression "la ley de lo caido caido" which translates into the nonsense "the law of the fallen fallen." While perfectly adapting to the timing of the mouth movement, the comedic effect of the phrase hangs on the repetition and mispronunciation of the last word. This idiom references a provincial or unrefined person and demonstrates how the adaptation of DG takes advantage of a broad spectrum of linguistic resources not fully exploited in the original version of TC.

Jorge Arvizu commented that in the recording set, there was opportunity for improvisation within the limits available in the lip-synching process. The team of voice actors creatively innovated at the level of vocality and orality by adding regional, class, and age indicators to the characters' personalities. Through Jorge Arvizu's voice modulation, Benny the Ball, from being just one of the guys and the right-hand of TC, became Benito Bodoque, a child who is learning the ropes of the trade while being corrupted in the process. Another example of innovation is the characterization of the cats as provincial migrants living in the big city. In DG, Choo-Choo's way of speaking suggests that he came from the State of Veracruz, contrary to the American version where the similarity of the accents indicates that all the characters are from, or around, Manhattan. Other particularities in the voice and speech delivery are applied to the rest of the gang to make them distinguishable: Brain, a name that ironically belongs to the slowest member of the gang in TC, acquires in the Spanish version the name of a famous Greek orator, Demostenes but is characterized by a consistent stuttering.

As demonstrated above, the adaptation team foregrounded the gang as protagonists on equal terms than DG by typifying members through appealing lines and memorable voices. This is reflected in the Spanish title that incorporates the gang, Top Cat becomes Don Gato *y* su pandilla. All the strategies used for the adaptation and dubbing of DG were groundbreaking in the 1970s and contributed to the series' astonishing success.

Translation and adaptations, and therefore the need for dubbing, have been discussed by post-colonial theoreticians as strategies of mainstream countries to impose their culture on the subaltern or conversely, as ways used by the colonized to expose and challenge the legacy of colonialism. Our interpretation, although framed by post-colonial theory, relies on the idea of creative hybridization—México has been a hybrid culture since the times of colonization by Spain in the 16th century. The uneven process of cultural colonization gave to the locals, according to Serge Gruzinsky, spaces to develop "individual and collective experiences that mixed interpretation with improvisation and fascinated copying." For these cultures, hybridity is a way of being, not an option. This is why the Mexican audience could accept these Spanish-speaking cats living in Manhattan and even empathized with them. *"In the heterogeneous societies of the Americas, the modern-self not only co-exists with others but has to live with*

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[7] by Vinay and Darbelnet (1958)

[8] Caravero pp176 book "the voice appears as the elementary principle of an ontology of uniqueness that radically contests the metaphysical tradition that silences the "I" in flesh and bone ... and ontology entrusted to the eye that has been the lifeblood of western metaphysics since Plato" (narcissus !!)

them, and shares the imperative of establishing a social and spatial order that gives place to all." (Mary L. Pratt).

Success through social content –

Until now our analysis has relied on examining the discrete technico-sensorial units of animation; however, we are aware that animation is not a mere combination of different materials but rather a heterogeneous but organic complex that has to be considered holistically. In our case study, the effect produced by dubbing supports one of the main aspects of the series content: the marginal condition of the cats. In hindsight, this might explain the failure of the series to attract American audiences.

In TC, as Wells mentioned, dialogue and voice gave graphically simple characters the appeal of celebrities. These characters are shaped to act as *placeholders* for ideological, ethical, or moral archetypes, to serve the needs of the American public[9]. The epistemic value and phenomenological weight of the voice is reinforced when the dialogue is adapted into Spanish, because now it becomes a common ground for the new audience, since the image remains foreign. Dubbing allows Mexican audiences to project their own cultural content onto the spaces afforded by the synchronized occurrence of word and image.

Social misfits such as those found in TC, had been popular in the United States in the early 20s and 30s when Charlie Chaplin's and Buster Keaton's success was at its height, but were outmoded by the 1960s when successful TV shows focused on middle-class families. In México, social and economic struggles ensured the continuous appeal of the marginal characters, and actors who touched on this archetype became México's most popular stars. The moneymaking schemer Tin-Tan (Germán Valdés) and the awkward smooth talker Cantinflas (Mario Moreno) reflected the hardships of the lower classes and provincials living in the big city. In both cases, they presented themselves as goodhearted, dignified, antiheros, struggling to make it in an oppressive system that marginalized them.

Wells argues that, because the cartoon's effect hinges upon the graphic artifice that establishes a fictional world, it could be experienced either as narration (when the audience is completely captivated) or as a 'text' (when it offers itself for interpretation establishing a more or less dissonant relationship with the social context). The ambivalent positioning of animation as either narration or 'text' within the social context allowed the Mexican audience to project their culture on the cartoon. Jokes, double meanings, and cultural allusions were referenced to the local cultural horizon despite the American setting. The hybrid nature of Mexican culture prepared the audience to experience the translated animation as 'text,' when perceiving the references, and even more so as narration, when accepting them.

The strong identification of the Mexican audience with the characters and with their plight reinforces the importance of the voice in DG. The visuals (and even the Spanish script) indicate that the cat's adventures take place in Manhattan and that the American city is the social space that constrains and shapes their lives. Nevertheless, because of the phenomenological weight that the dubbing affords to the characters and the network of references to Mexican culture, the specific traits of the city recede to the background. In the dubbed version Manhattan becomes a cipher of any cosmopolitan city, mainly in this case, México's capital. This helps to explain why, despite the specificity of the geographical location (unusual in animation, consider for example the settings of the Flintstones and the Jetsons), TC became an international success.

Conclusion –

This paper has contended that the stylized graphics of HB and the crucial place dialogue had in their TV cartoons, allowed the dubbed voices to override the visual indicators that placed the action in the United States and identified the characters as Americans. Dubbing, in the case of DG, encouraged the substitution of Mexican for American cultural content transforming the characters into embodiments of the new audience's archetypes.

In order to highlight the mechanisms that might have secured the international success of TC, this study has delved into the structure of HB animation and re-examines the importance of the voice in animation.

First, we took advantage of the film theories that define cinema as an audio/visual form composed of two *technico-sensorial* units where sound and image are *indexical* traces of the actors' performance. These theories underpinned our characterization of animation as an *ontologically hybrid cinematic* form, where the voice is an *indexical* trace of an actor's voice while the image is fabricated. We then considered how dubbing into Spanish increases the epistemic value and phenomenological weight of the voice in the cartoon, and fundamentally alters the relation of the "word to image." While the image remains American, through dubbing, the voice sound and the text becomes Mexican.

Because the voice is the point of entry for the Mexican audience (dubbing) and helps to transform the characters into embodiments of Mexican archetypes, we used Caravero's analysis of the split of the voice into *orality* and *vocality*. The notion of *vocality* helped us to better understand the signifying capacity of the voice as material sound and to consider its impact on the audience. Through *vocality* we gauged the voice's role as conveyor of the meanings provided by the creative adaptation of the script into Spanish.

[9] Inner directed and outer directed

Even though Wells' seminal analysis of American cartoons does not specifically address the oral dimension of the voice, it offered us a fantastic model to explore the way cartoons interact with the social context. The idea of hybrid cultures afforded a conceptual blueprint to postulate a mode of spectatorship that allows audiences to empathize with the cartoon characters in spite of the public's lack of familiarity with most of the cultural references hinted by the graphic form. We concluded that dubbing encouraged Mexican audiences to project their own cultural content onto characters that had been expressly created to act as *placeholders* for cultural archetypes. The Mexican audience's habitation to cultural hybridity encourages them to take advantage of the gaps and fissures allotted by cartoons' interaction with the social context to incorporate DG and his gang into their cultural horizon.

Our methodology and conceptual framework were tailored to the characteristics of the case study we analyzed. Our next step will be to see if it works for the consideration of other animations, as we hope that our analysis helps us better understand animation as a *hybrid-cultural product*.

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