Transnational Screens

ISSN: 2578-5273 (Print) 2578-5265 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rtrc21

A language not their own: transnational production in 'foreign' dialogue

Hannah Holtzman & Gemma King

To cite this article: Hannah Holtzman & Gemma King (2026) A language not their own: transnational production in 'foreign' dialogue, Transnational Screens, 17:1, 1-6, DOI: 10.1080/25785273.2026.2634419

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/25785273.2026.2634419

Published online: 01 Apr 2026.

TRANSNATIONAL SCREENS
2026, VOL. 17, NO. 1, 1–6
https://doi.org/10.1080/25785273.2026.2634419

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

INTRODUCTION

A language not their own: transnational production in 'foreign' dialogue

Hannah Holtzman [a] and Gemma King [b]

[a]Faculty of Liberal Arts, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan; [b]School of Literature, Languages and Linguistics, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

Cultural and linguistic border-crossings are at the heart of transnational filmmaking practice, and language barriers pose unique challenges and opportunities to these crossings. Media production in a language one does not speak or understand may raise questions of authenticity, exploitation, and misrepresentation, while also allowing filmmakers to reach wider audiences and prompting reflection on the instability of national borders in production contexts. The articles in this special issue include case studies and broader examinations of multilingual and translingual trends in contemporary screen media production. The screen texts studied include documentary, narrative feature films, and streaming series made using American and French Sign Languages (ASL, LSF), Danish, English, French, Greek, Japanese, Kurdish, Navajo, Polish, Sámi, and Swedish. While these screen texts developed in response to different incentives and their productions involved diverse practical and ethical considerations, they share fundamental similarities in the language barriers encountered during production and acts of translation, multilingualism, and creative collaboration involved in overcoming these barriers. Informed by insights from Deaf Criticism, biopolitics, cultural studies, and transnational film theory, these articles intervene in cultural studies discussions of nation, language, and identity and the evolving discourse around representation and authenticity in screen media.

Keywords
translation; language barrier; multilingualism; media production; authorship

One of the most striking contemporary examples of filmmaking across language barriers is Wim Wender's 2023 *Perfect Days*, a Japan-set, Japanese-language film from a German director who does not speak Japanese. The protagonist in the film, Hirayama (Yakusho Koji), is a sanitation worker in Tokyo who seldom speaks; rather, his interiority is communicated largely through his eyes. For Wenders, 'The way [Hirayama] looks at the world becomes the essence of the film', and Yakusho Koji, the actor who played him, achieved a 'great feat' as he managed 'to really become talkative through his eyes' (Wenders and Yakusho 2024). Hirayama's 'perfect days' involve listening to The Velvet Underground, The Kinks, and Nina Simone on cassette tape, reading William Faulkner and Patricia Highsmith in translation, and taking photographs of *komorebi*, the sunlight filtering through the leaves of trees. He crosses paths a few times with a man on the street

CONTACT Hannah Holtzman holtzman@sophia.ac.jp Faculty of Liberal Arts, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan

(played by dancer Tanaka Min) who does not speak and expresses something like *komorebi* through his dancing in public space. This communication beyond language is not new to Wenders's work. In his 2011 documentary *Pina* featuring the work of German choreographer Pina Bausch, he reflects on the limitations of verbal language: 'There are situations that leave you speechless. All you can do is hint at things. Words, too, can't do more than just evoke things. That's where dance comes in again'.

An intertextually rich film, *Perfect Days* was co-written over the course of three weeks by Wenders and Takasaki Takuma, a writer, producer, and creative director at Dentsu, the largest advertising agency in Japan. The film was shot handheld in 16 days in Tokyo with minimal equipment and little to no rehearsal. Accordingly, a documentary quality filters through the film like another kind of *komorebi*. And although it was not his first film about Japan, *Perfect Days* is the first film Wenders made almost entirely in Japanese, a language he does not speak.[1] The script for the film includes little dialogue but considerable detail about what happens off-screen (Yakusho and Takasaki 2023). Fragments of the backstory Wenders imagined for Hirayama are suggested in interactions with his niece and estranged sister, perhaps casting more shadow than light. The music Hirayama listens to serves the narrative and functions more broadly as a kind of universal language between generations and cultures. Much of the communication in *Perfect Days* happens in indirect ways through expression, body language, and intertextual play.

Filmmaking in translation is not a new phenomenon but perhaps an increasingly common one as transnational production becomes increasingly widespread. Some productions in translation might fit into Hamid Naficy's definition of 'accented cinema' by filmmakers displaced by diaspora or exile (Naficy 2001). Other filmmakers work in translation less out of necessity than by choice. In turning their attention to images and sound and in working closely with translators and interpreters, screenwriters, directors, and others involved in the production process do not necessarily need to speak the language of the world that will be captured for the screen. For transnational production in 'foreign' dialogue, the question of language is also a political one deriving from historically uneven and shifting power dynamics. What does it mean to work in a 'foreign' language? Foreign to whom? The ethics and politics of translation and on-screen linguistic representation are common concerns across the studies in this issue. As close study of some of these productions reveals, charges of exploitation and extraction may be complicated by shifting conceptions of identity and of the political stakes of visual storytelling. Transnational productions may also need to be contextualized within longer traditions of cross-cultural exchange to fully grasp such dynamics.

Beyond the question of *how* filmmakers work in languages other than their own is *why* they choose to do so. International co-productions often involve incentives such as access to funding and new audiences. Economic incentives in some productions may perpetuate exploitative practices by those with authorial control who may not know the language but maintain authority over the narrative. The economic incentives motivating the productions analyzed in this issue vary greatly and introduce further complexity in the analyses. For Wenders, for example, the opportunity to make *Perfect Days* came at the invitation of Yanai Koji – a senior executive officer in retail and reportedly from the richest family in Japan (Karmali 2025) – to make short documentaries about The Tokyo Toilet, his personal urban redevelopment project.[2] *Perfect Days* also reveals the limitations of

a purely economic motivation for the work as Wenders did not end up making commissioned documentaries about toilets but instead developed a narrative feature about a person who cleans them and his way of being in the world.

Finally, the case studies in this issue highlight the complexities of transnational reception. For whom are transnational productions in 'foreign' dialogue made? How might viewers from various national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds understand these screen texts as 'foreign', and how might perceptions of accuracy and authenticity differ across audiences? Institutional contexts such as festivals and award ceremonies show how national designations still shape distribution and reception in significant ways. *Perfect Days*, for example, was Japan's submission to the 2024 Academy Awards for Best International Feature Film, with Wenders becoming the first non-Japanese director to be nominated for a Japanese entry.

This special issue of *Transnational Screens* is composed of five research articles which arose from a panel of the same name at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference held in Boston in 2024. In five studies of screen text production and reception in translation, this issue addresses key questions of authorship and authority, language barriers, and attempts to overcome them through acts of translation, multilingualism, and creative audiovisual storytelling. Becca Voelcker's article explores the ambivalence of translation and identity in Arlene Bowman's 1984 documentary, *Navajo Talking Picture*. The film is shot on the reservation where her grandmother, Biah, lives, far from Bowman's own home in Los Angeles. As Voelcker explains, the tensions between documentarian and documentary subject are quickly laid bare, as Biah resists participation in the filming process, and Bowman's insistent pursuit of her subject comes to resemble the 'objectifying gaze' so frequently cast on Indigenous people by non-Indigenous filmmakers. Central to these tensions is language, as Bowman does not understand her grandmother's Navajo speech and Biah does not speak English. The article conducts a close reading of the film and its use of various translation techniques Bowman employs throughout the interview and editing processes (from live interpreters to post-production dubbing), often to seemingly extractive effect. Using Trinh T. Minh-ha's concept of the 'insider/outsider' filmmaker (Minh-Ha 1991), Voelcker argues that Bowman deliberately problematizes her own insider/outsider identity through this intra-familial language barrier, her assimilated status as a non-Navajo speaker exposing the colonial fracture between generations.

In their article about the 1986 American Sign Language film *Children of a Lesser God*, Sofya Gollan and Gemma King analyze the linguistic and cultural power dynamics of hearing-led screen productions whose sign language dialogue is 'foreign' to their creators. They argue that centuries of audism (discrimination against deaf people and Deaf culture) and oralism (the systematic repression of sign language in education and public life) have led to a devaluing of sign language competency in screen productions about deafness. This 'chronic language barrier' compromises the linguistic integrity of sign language dialogue, which is interrupted and obscured by phonocentric framing and editing norms, a problem that goes undetected by the non-signing writers, directors, cinematographers, and editors who are presenting it. The article reads *Children of a Lesser God*, the first major feature film to include a Deaf actor in a starring role, to investigate how the film's cinematography and creative direction undermine the native sign used by its multiple Deaf actors. Proposing the distinction of signing versus non-

signing 'authorial control', they suggest that while Deaf casting is essential, an authentic filmmaking model is only possible when Deaf perspectives are incorporated at the level of direction, writing, and/or production, where executive decision-making power lies. As they argue, such an incorporation of Deaf perspectives can ensure that sign languages are not treated as 'foreign' languages within the very countries they originate from.

Following on from her co-authored article with Gemma King, Sofya Gollan provides a provocative 'call for change' to the dominant hearing-led screen culture which has long barred Deaf filmmakers from accessing the aforementioned 'authorial control'. Drawing on her lived experience as a Deaf filmmaker-scholar with 20 years of directing, screen-writing, and acting experience in the Australian film industry, Gollan argues that films and series featuring deaf characters have long been defined by a central paradox. On the one hand, film is the technology most capable of representing the spatial, temporal, and visual nature of sign language, which is itself a form of moving image. Yet on the other, ableist assumptions about what it takes to create a commercially and creatively successful screen text have led to extremely limited opportunities for Deaf creators. The article serves both as a manifesto and a critical analysis, providing a systematic reflection on what Deaf authorial control might look like across the key creative roles of director, writer, and producer. Writing back to traditional audist assumptions that have shaped the vast majority of screen productions about deafness, Gollan proposes actionable and generative solutions for Deaf storytelling that leverage the full potential of the visual language of cinema.

While the language relations mentioned so far are highly asymmetrical, symptomatic of long histories of colonialism and audism and their erasure of Indigenous and signed languages, multilingual production also occurs in contexts of more symmetrical, bilateral exchange. Shifting the focus to transnational co-production between France and Japan, Hannah Holtzman studies the French film *La Vérité* (2019) by Japanese filmmaker Kore-eda Hirokazu. Although the film is set and shot in France with dialogue entirely in French, the Palme d'or winner Kore-eda does not speak French and relied on a number of observational and collaborative techniques, which Holtzman describes as a form of 'poetic vérité', in order to negotiate this language barrier. The choice of French was a strategic one allowing for access to prestigious and generous French funding, however it was also a key creative move. Holtzman explores what she calls Kore-eda's 'horizontal working structure': reliance on the mediation of bicultural translator and interpreter Léa Le Dimna as well as visual language in *mise en scène*, openness to improvisation, and a semi-biographical and intertextual play between the characters and the careers of the actors playing them (French and American stars Catherine Deneuve, Juliette Binoche, and Ethan Hawke). Ultimately, Holtzman reveals how this combination of filmmaking approaches results in a uniquely transnational product, despite the dialogue primarily in French.

Finally, Michael Gott closes this special issue with his study of contemporary French co-production series and their frequent multilingual strategies. The article takes Danish-French series *DNA* (Arte and Danish TV2, 2019) as its primary case study, supported by secondary examples including *No Man's Land* (Arte and Hulu, 2020-), *Midnight Sun* (Canal+ and Swedish public broadcaster SVT, 2016), and *Salade Greque* (Amazon Prime Video, 2022), a French series set in Greece. Together, these texts include dialogue in French, Danish, English, Greek, Kurdish, Polish, Sámi, and Swedish. Such transnational co-productions necessarily entail collaboration among

actors, writers, directors, and showrunners with varying linguistic backgrounds, and frequently lead to cases where actors perform in languages that are foreign to the series' creators. Gott undertakes a production studies analysis of the interwoven funding and co-production strategies that allow these multilingual series to thrive in their local and international contexts. He combines this examination of the broader material conditions under which these series are made with narrative analysis of them, revealing how multilingualism is not simply a fact of their production, but a core thematic focus and narrative driver. Through these decentered visions of contemporary, multilingual Europe (and the Middle East), Gott reveals a growing trend in French television towards a 'less French' model in which language diversity – and thus language barriers – are intrinsic.

When a language barrier exists between screen creators and the dialogue they are depicting, screen production becomes a language contact zone (Pratt 1991). Such contact zones are perhaps most obvious in multi-country co-production, however Indigenous and signed languages remind us of the chronic language barriers that arise within domestic and national contexts from the legacy of colonialism and ableism. These barriers, we argue, reproduce the linguistic power dynamics of traditional transnational production and expose 'the multilingualism within' (King 2023). Whether officially national or transnational, this diversity frequently results in filmmaking across language barriers, with collaboration between writers, directors, and actors who cannot understand one another without mediation. Sometimes, as in *La Vérité*, production teams engage a full-time, official translator and interpreter behind the scenes. Other times, as in *Navajo Talking Picture*, translation is partial and relies upon the labor of dubiously recruited documentary subjects displayed on screen. Each of the five contributions in this special issue seeks to elucidate the complexity of screen productions where the dialogue is 'foreign' to their various creators. The latter's incapacity to verify and modify linguistic details on set can both increase and undermine the authenticity of a text and the ethics of its cultural representation. As the following articles reveal, such contact zones can become sites for the perpetuation and negotiation of power imbalances and for cultural and linguistic exclusion, but also for generative new forms of collaboration that explore the creative potential of language.

Notes

1. Wenders's other films in and about Japan include *Tokyo-ga* (1985), *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* (1989), and *Until the End of the World* (1991).
2. The Tokyo Toilet involved 17 public toilets designed by renowned architects as a public awareness campaign and beautifying effort ahead of the 2020 Olympics.

Notes on contributors

Hannah Holtzman is Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at Sophia University in Tokyo and author of *Through a Nuclear Lens: France, Japan, and Cinema from Hiroshima to Fukushima* (State University of New York Press, 2024). Other work has appeared in *French Screen Studies, French Studies, Contemporary French Civilization, and Docalogue*.

Gemma King is Senior Lecturer in French at the Australian National University. From 2023 to 2026, she is an ARC DECRA Fellow on the project 'Sign on Screen: Language,

Culture and Power in Sign Language Cinemas'. She researches contemporary francophone and transnational screen cultures, specialising in representations of multilingualism, deafness, disability, colonial histories, violence and social power. She is author of the books *Decentring France: Multilingualism and Power in Contemporary French Cinema* (Manchester University Press, 2017) and *Jacques Audiard* (2021), a volume in Manchester's French Film Directors series.

ORCID

Hannah Holtzman http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6327-3725
Gemma King http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4695-4032

References

Karmali, N. 2025. "Japan's 50 Richest." Forbes, Forbes. June 2. https://www.forbes.com/lists/japan-billionaires/.

King, G. 2023. "Sign Language and Cinéma-Monde in Marie Heurtin: On Deaf Cinema and Troubling the Notion of French National Language." *Journal of Romance Studies* 23 (1): 49–65. https://doi.org/10.3828/jrs.2023.4.

Minh-Ha, T. T. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York and London: Routledge.

Naficy, H. 2001. An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking, Princeton University Press.

Pratt, M.-L. 1991. "Arts of the Contact Zone." Profession: 33–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/25595469.

Wenders, W., and K. Yakusho. 2024. "Perfect Days: Interview with Koji Yakausho and Wim Wenders." Interview by Nobuhiro Hosoki. Feb 10. https://cinemadailyus.com/interviews/perfect-days-interview-with-koji-yakusho-and-wim-wenders/.

Yakusho, K., and T. Takasaki. 2023. "Koji Yakusho and Takuma Takasaki on Perfect Days and Collaborating with Wim Wenders." Interview by Film at Lincoln Center, Oct 16. https://www.filmlinc.org/nyff2025/daily/koji-yakusho-and-takuma-takasaki-on-perfect-days-and-collaborating-with-wim-wenders/.