1. Introduction

The interplay between various forms of expression with technology has never meant that censorship is not enforced or has eased. In fact, censorship persists, though frequently in less direct, explicit, but more oblique, implicit ways. Censorship of ideas expressed in any medium, be it a visual or a written one, has always been practised (Green and Karolides, 2014), whether by official (state) censors, who enforce the political, religious, societal, and moral agendas of the state or by the agents involved in producing and disseminating these media of expression. The methods of enforcing censorship range from blatant censorial practices like banning, to subtle ways of manipulating various processes of selection and representation of ideas in visual, audio, and written texts (translated and non-translated). Further, these censorial practices have evolved over the years to correspond to modern-day developments that have resulted in more complex means of communication among people and in more sophisticated individuals, since “societies grew more complex, better educated, and more technologically advanced” (Caso and Collins, 2008, p.3). The fact that censorship operates in subtle, unanticipated ways thus necessitates researchers of censorship to account for new perspectives through which the questions of who enforces censorship and how censorial practices can be reinterpreted are demonstrated.

Censorship in the context of translation is equally complex because of the “polymorphous nature of censorship and its slipperiness when applied to translations, which, on account, of their dual textual nature, can be easily manipulated by different agents at various stages of their textual production” (Billiani, 2007, p.3). In fact, the study of translation in relation to censorship adds more complexity since dealing with translated texts means dealing with more linguistic and cultural layers and inevitably suggests that more agents are involved in either enforcing censorship or responding to censorship. The difficulty of investigating censorship in translation becomes even more evident when the translation area to be studied is audiovisual translation (AVT). Indeed, translation of audiovisual (AV) content, whether subtitled or dubbed, is one of the most complex and impenetrable areas of translation, considering the multiple influential factors and agents involved and the operating systems within which these translations are produced. In the investigation of censorship in AVT, not only is research concerned with different cultures and linguistic systems – the source and target cultures and languages – but also with deconstructing the entire system within...
which the official censorial apparatus operates and interacts with the agents involved in producing, selecting, importing, filtering, translating, and distributing foreign AV content to be exhibited in the target culture(s).

In this study, I examine this system and its incorporated processes closely in the context of foreign film exhibition in the AME with special reference to Jordan and Lebanon. However, the examination of censorship in this specific context and region is conducted through a rather different perspective of how censorship is generally perceived in this context. Censorship in general, and in the context of foreign film exhibition in particular, is perceived as a practice enforced by only official political authorities and for the prohibition of certain ideas and opinions expressed through the image and the word. However, this study argues that censorship in the context of foreign film exhibition in the AME is one that allows to enable the exhibition rather than to prohibit it. Therefore, in this study, censorship not only aims to conceal or restrict access to ideas, texts or images, but to produce a culturally, politically, religiously, and socially acceptable image or text. By the same token, censorship is viewed as an integrated and comprehensive system in which censors, alongside other influential agents, like exhibitors and translators operating in various stages of the system of foreign film exhibition, work towards enabling rather than disabling these foreign films. This is evidenced and substantiated in the opinions expressed in the interviews with various agents involved in different processes of the system of foreign film exhibition and in the proliferation of not only this form of AV content, but also in the wide range of media platforms.

In the discussion below, I analyse this system and the roles played by various influential agents involved in this system based on the interviews conducted in Jordan and Lebanon. To this end, I answer the main question of who enforces censorship on foreign film (image and translation) in the AME, and in what ways, by examining the main processes carried out in sequential but overlapping stages prior to making a classification decision. In addition, I address the questions: how are foreign films processed and adapted in the system of foreign film exhibition to make them screenable in the receiving AME countries, and to what extent can the censorial practices implemented by the agents in this system be interpreted as enabling rather than obstructive, disabling practices?

2. Research questions

1. Who enforces censorship on foreign film (image and translation) in the Arab Middle East?
2. What are the practices in which censorship is imposed on foreign film?

3. Literature review

AVT, as an industry, emerged in the Arab world when the first talkies arrived in Egypt in the early 1930s. In fact, Egypt was the pioneer in film production and distribution as well as the production of AV translations of foreign films that were screened in Egyptian film theatres and in those that were later built across the Arab world. Pioneering AVT as an industry in the Arab world authorised Egypt to make significant decisions in regard to AVT - decisions that would later shape AVT practices and methods applied in the entire Arab world (Gamal, 2007). The most important of these decisions was the AVT method to be used to translate foreign films into Arabic. According to Abu Shadi (2004), dubbing was ruled out, so the decision was made to subtitle Anglophone, Francophone, or other foreign films. This decision directly affected the status of dubbing as a form of AVT in the Arab world as it has become not as widely implemented especially in the context of cinema as it is in other parts of the world like Spain, Russia, and Italy.

Consequently, and despite the continuous existence of both subtitling and dubbing in the Arab world today, the contexts and the extent to which each AVT mode is used are rather distinct. Subtitling is more commonly used than dubbing especially when the source language is English. For this reason, American and British films, TV series, and documentaries are mostly subtitled, whereas Turkish soap operas, Mexican telenovelas, and children’s cartoons, to name but a few, are generally dubbed into Arabic. But why did Egyptian stakeholders choose subtitling over dubbing for the translation of foreign films? Maluf (2005) and Gamal (2007) explicate that this decision was made primarily because the art of film production had emerged in Egypt between the 1920s and 1930s, long before any other Arab country showed an interest in this form of creative outlet. For many decades, Egypt was the only provider of Arab films for Arab audiences, and Egyptian filmmakers saw subtitling as a less threatening choice than dubbing. For these filmmakers, subtitling would make the American rival that enjoyed ‘technical superiority’, sophisticated cinematography, and more progressed script writing less accessible (Gamal, 2008, p. 3).

Subtitling was first introduced to film viewers in Egypt by Italian translation companies when the first foreign talkies arrived in the early 1930s. These Italian companies remained active in Egypt until the mid-1940s, when Anis Ebaid established an AVT company that dominated the AVT industry in Egypt and the Arab world until the late 1980s (Gamal, 2009). The advent of satellite TV channels in the 1990s and their increased popularity in the years that followed created more pressure on AVT services; a pressure that in fact ended the monopoly of Ebaid’s company in the MENA region. The need for more AVT providers that catered for these satellite channels – which relied heavily on foreign programmes – resulted in the foundation of multiple AVT companies in Arab countries such as Lebanon, UAE, and Syria. Lebanon was the second Arab country after Egypt to follow on the path of AVT, with applications of dubbing and subtitling as early as the 1960s (Maluf, 2005; Gamal, n.d.). As a result of the early emergence of AVT in Lebanon, the subtitling industry there has become the second largest in the region, according to Gamal (n.d.). Today, Lebanon is home to a number of the largest AVT and media companies in the Middle East such as Haroun Studios (est. in the mid-1940s) and Screens International (est. in 1991).

Since most of the AV translations broadcast across the Arab world via satellite TV channels are produced either in Egypt or Lebanon, the decisions that were made in these two countries regarding AVT, and the current practices in this industry have influenced and shaped academic AVT research in the Arab world. In other words, AVT studies conducted by Arab researchers do often not focus on the AVT practices in a single Arab country. This is due to the AV preferences catered for by regional or pan-Arab satellite TV channels which aim to produce pan-Arab rather than localised, national AV content or translations of foreign material. By the same token, foreign films screened in Arab cinemas are imported, filtered, and distributed by regional companies that target several Arab countries, rather than by local companies that target the local audience where the company is based. For this reason, research on AVT produced in one Arab country often basically reflects AVT practices in the rest of the Arab world.

The academic research in AVT in the Arab world has significant, common features which I will explain according to the existing research in AVT in the Arab world. For instance, the fact that Anglophone (specifically American) AV productions account for most of the AV productions worldwide, and in the Arab world as well, most of the research in AVT in the Arab world has focused on subtitling rather than dubbing. In consequence, subtitling, as a form of AVT with its various advantages and features, has been the focus of AVT research in the Arab world as a field of academic research in the Arab world. Similarly, translational practices and choices made by AV translators, which are influenced by their Arab cultural, political, religious, and moral backgrounds, are highly consistent.

The research undertaken in this field covers a wide range of aspects and issues related to AVT. To illustrate, Gamal (2008, 2009) has extensively investigated the progress of this industry and the emergence of the cinema industry in Egypt in the early twentieth century and the progress
of subtitling for both television and cinema. Furthermore, subtitling and dubbing as the two major AVT forms in the Arab world have been reviewed to account for the pros and cons of each form in the context of translating AV material into Arabic (Mazid, 2006; Gamal, 2008; Alkadi, 2010; Thawabteh, 2011; Khalaf and Rashid, 2016; Debbas and Haider, 2020). In the case of subtitled AV programmes into Arabic, Khuddro (2000), Mazid (2006), Alkadi (2010), Thawabteh (2011), and Debbas and Haider (2020) have highlighted some errors AV translators make due to linguistic, technical, and cultural issues they might encounter in the AV text. Furthermore, the existing studies have revealed that there are cultural, ideological, religious, and moral issues, such as translating (sexual) humour, obscenity, and swearing, that challenge AV translators when subtitling an AV text from (an) open culture(s) like the Western culture(s) to (a) conservative one(s) like the Arabic culture(s) (Mazid, 2006; Al-Adwan, 2009; Alkadi, 2010; Thawabteh, 2011, 2017; and Khalaf and Rashid, 2016.)

In terms of censorship and the extent to which it has impact on both the image and text of the AV programme, hesitant and modest attempts have been made to discuss who censors what and why. For example, Khuddro (2000), Mazid (2006), Gamal (2008), Khalaf and Rashid (2016), and Thawabteh (2017) argue that censorship is likely to affect the translational choices that AV translators make when they encounter one of the issues mentioned previously. In this regard, the role of state censors is briefly mentioned in Mazid (2006), Gamal (2008), and Thawabteh (2017); however, neither the censorial system as a whole, nor the censorial laws based on which censors and translators perform their job, is discussed in any study on AVT in the Arab world. This study attempts to cover this gap by examining the various processes incorporated in the system of foreign film exhibition and how censorship is implemented in each process.

4. Methodology: data collection and interviews

To collect the data necessary for this study, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews with several agents involved in the system of foreign film import, distribution, translation and censorship, either in person or over the phone. The first three interviews were conducted with three state film classifiers, (Al-Nsour, Al-Zoubi, and Al-Sma’ir) in Amman, employed by the Classifications Department (CD) at the Media Commission (MC) in Jordan. The fourth interview was conducted over the phone with Bassam Eid, an operations and product manager at Empire Film Distribution and Exhibition company based in Beirut, Lebanon. The role of this interviewee is complicated but important, as he refers to himself as the exhibitor, the term I will use in this study. Finally, the last three interviews were conducted with the three film translators – Carole, Rania, and Nelly in July, 2018 – who work for Haroun Studios, which is a film translation company based in Beirut. All the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated from Jordanian and Lebanese Arabic into English. The data collected are analysed as per the main questions relating to the processes mentioned above and the main topics discussed as related to the roles played by the interviewees. The main questions I asked the interviewees focused on processes of selection, filtering, importation, distribution, translation, and censorship,ensorial and editorial decisions and choices, personal experiences of censorship, and, finally, examples of censored films and translations. The semi-structured format allowed for more questions to emerge as the interviews went on, and allowed the interviewees to discuss other significant points, based on their experience in the field.

4.1. Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accord with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Consequently, this study’s ethical approval was obtained from the Deanship of Scientific Research at the Applied Science Private University with the approval number (FAS/2017-2018/323). Also, written informed consent was obtained from all subjects before the study was conducted.

5. Deconstructing the system of foreign film exhibition in the Arab Middle East

The analysis of this system of exhibition is based on the interviews, and it suggests that the system of foreign film exhibition in the AME countries is initiated in one of three major Arab cities, Beirut, Cairo, or Dubai, but is only finalised when the foreign film is examined by the respective boards of censors or classifiers in the receiving countries. This signifies that the culture of foreign film exhibition in the receiving countries is shaped by cultures of exhibition in other Arab countries and internal and external powers, institutions, and factors. Thus, the processes carried out in these cities, which include selecting, filtering, translating, and distributing, influence the classification decisions made about foreign films in the receiving countries. This is because the entertainment companies, which own and operate commercial film theatres in the receiving countries, have access to foreign films and blockbusters only through distribution and exhibition companies based in these three key Arab cities.

To this end, I will analyse the system of foreign film exhibition which incorporates the processes of film selection, filtering, importation, translation, distribution, and classification (see Figure 1) which in turn involves managing negotiations with the boards of censors and film classifiers across the Arab world until the classification decision is made in each country. These processes are carried out by the major Western (mainly American) film production and distribution studios, the Western-based distribution studios that target audiences internationally, including Arab countries, the pan-Arab world distribution companies, the local distribution companies, and the censors in the individual receiving AME country.

Although the system starts with the major American film production and distribution companies and studios, the emphasis of the discussion below is on the stages following the production of foreign films, that is, the stages in which the rest of the agents in the West and the Middle East are involved. These stages or processes are overseen by pan-Arab distribution companies, such as Empire1 where the interviewed exhibitor works as a product and operations manager. For this specific reason, selecting one of the pan-Arab distribution and exhibition companies based in Lebanon to interview an exhibitor, who has knowledge and expertise, was a vital part of my study. In addition, Empire has representatives throughout the Arab world; these representatives facilitate the communication between the company, on the one hand, and the censors and film theatres in each receiving country, on the other hand.

Empire Company, as a pan-Arab distribution company, plays a number of pivotal roles in the industry of film exhibition in the Arab world. Firstly, it communicates with film producers, in the West and elsewhere, via the Western-based distribution studios. For this process, Empire mainly communicates through one specific company, Deluxe Studios which is based in London. Such communication involves dealing with films produced by major film studios like Paramount Pictures and Sony Pictures, in addition to independent films produced by small production companies. Secondly, Empire filters the films according to key criteria, such as the theme of the film and whether or not it is deemed too controversial; it matches this to the target Arab audiences’ preferences and the anticipated commercial success of the film – these criteria will be explained in section 5.3. On this basis, Empire claims to select the films to be imported and distributed in the Arab world.

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1 Empire International has two major sections. The company distributes films across the Arab world and exhibits films in its several film theatres that are located in Lebanon, Erbil, and Iraq.
5.1. Foreign film selection

When the exhibitor receives a film from a producer, be it an independent or a major company, the exhibitor makes an initial decision as to whether the film is appropriate to be sent to the Arab world. This decision is made in accordance with a number of key criteria decided by the exhibitor based on his expertise. Let us examine them in more detail: the main criterion is the theme of the film and whether it is too controversial to be sent to the Arab world. In such a situation, the main theme is examined by the exhibitor who determines if the controversy of the theme can be manipulated through censorship. Consequently, if the main theme of the film which is present throughout most of the scenes – and accordingly can be identified by the audience effortlessly – is not acceptable in the Arab world, the film will not be considered for importation by the exhibitor. Moreover, if the theme is tolerated by the audience and can be screened in the Arab world, but there are a number of problematic scenes that might colour perception of the main theme or the audiences' view of the theme, then it will also be disregarded unless the film producer approves cutting off these scenes. Another criterion is the preferences of the audiences in the receiving countries. Knowing or predicting these preferences is based on the expertise of the exhibitor, which Eid confirmed that he has developed in the many years of his work in this industry. Although the first two criteria are significant for considering a film for importation, Eid nonetheless emphasises that what we might think of as the qualifying criterion for selection is the anticipated commercial success of the film. Needless to say, importing a controversial film involves some financial risks on the part of the distribution and exhibition company because it entails covering the costs of translating and shipping. Commercial success is thus the key factor for selecting or not selecting a film that might incur costs before it is banned from screening.

5.2. Foreign film filtering

According to Eid, if the film is considered by the exhibitor as one that might be appropriate and commercially successful, Empire communicates with owners of film theatres across the Middle East to identify the countries that are to receive the film. Once the exhibitor determines which countries will receive the film, they execute an initial scene filtering. In this filtering process, the scenes that are regarded by the exhibitor as definitely and overtly controversial – for example, full nudity, or scenes offending Islam or Christianity – are cut. Such cuts are not made in coordination with the entertainment companies or the censors, but rather in agreement with the producer of the film. Furthermore, these censorial practices are not intended to affect the theme or the master scenes\(^2\) of the film or exceed more than a few minutes. However, this might not always be as anticipated by film classifiers in the receiving countries. In fact, it was cut like this to which the Jordanian authorities, namely the Classifications Department (the CD) objected when they received The Wolf of Wall Street (2013) and The Danish Girl (2016) as both films were so heavily censored by the exhibitor that they were subsequently either pulled from cinemas or banned by the CD in Amman because the films' plots were so severely distorted. According to Al-Smair, the CD objected to the scene-filtering which basically aims to adapt the film and make it acceptable by as many Arab countries and audiences as possible since one version of each film is distributed across the receiving countries in the Middle East – ignoring the fact that censorship is different in each Arab country; consequently, fewer cuts (by the exhibitor) have been made in films since then. Such initial filtering of the scenes, the classifiers at the CD in Amman argue, is a consistent practice despite not being one of the exhibitor's official duties.

Achieving commercial success by screening as many films in as many Arabic cinemas as possible, according to the exhibitor, is a key element to select a film. To this end, the exhibitor, Eid in this case, regards himself as an expert on what Arab audiences' preferences are and what censorship in each Arab country might consider appropriate to be screened. On this basis of a one-size-fits-all approach, he resorts to censorship to increase the chances of the film being approved by boards of censors across most (if not all) Arab countries. It should be noted that Eid does not directly and openly admit performing such censorship; he alludes to it when we discuss, for example, the ban of The Danish Girl film in Qatar, noting that “the censors banned the film, though I promise and assure you that the controversial scenes were originally cut out”. Of course, Eid argues that he only carries out these cuts with the full agreement of the producer (who, of course, is no less financially invested in the film).

In the filtering process, the cuts are made after the exhibitor has permission from the production company to watch the film via a live streaming feature available for a restricted group of agents through a login option on a special website. The purpose of this pre-viewing is to give the exhibitor the chance to make any initial comments on any scenes that might be deemed controversial in the receiving countries. The benefit of such a process is that such comments – if the producer considers them – might decrease the chances of subjecting the films to more stringent acts of censorship when they are delivered to the censor in the receiving countries. Consequently, when an exhibitor comments on certain scenes as problematic which are considered likely to obstruct the screening of the film in some or most Arab countries, there are two possible responses. The first response is that the producer agrees to censor the problematic scenes, so that effectively censorship takes place before the film arrives at the censorship/classification departments in the receiving countries. The Wolf of Wall Street and The Danish Girl are two examples of this first scenario. The second scenario is that the producer refuses to subject their film to any initial cuts for artistic reasons, even if they later agree to cuts demanded by official censors. If the controversial scenes are left uncensored, Empire takes the financial risk of translating and shipping the film to the Middle East; one recent example is Bohemian Rhapsody (2018). A scene of

\(^2\) The main theme is the predominant theme of the film that cannot be concealed or censored even if some scenes are cut out.

\(^3\) According to Al-Nsour, the head of the CD in Amman, a master scene is one that contributes to the story and plot of the film thus having it cut off would affect or even distort the story.
an intimate kiss between two men was deemed controversial by Eid; the producer, however, refused to cut it. After the film was translated and shipped to the Arab world, the Arab countries, except for Lebanon, refused to screen the film and requested the scene be cut. As a result, the film screening in the rest of the receiving Arab countries began one week later than in Lebanon because the exhibitor had to contact the producer, who, for financial reasons, finally approved cutting the scene.

5.3. Subtitling foreign films

Eid confirms that censors will not approve foreign films that have not been subtitled, especially if the film is to be screened in cinemas with subtitles. Thus, as an exhibitor, Eid contracts film translation companies in Lebanon to translate these films before distribution. However, according to the exhibitor, the translation should not breach censorial rules, although it should be noted, no formal, written guidelines are provided for translators for this purpose. Hence, the exhibitor asks the translators through the translation company to euphemise, when necessary, without providing specific guidelines on how this should be done. He also notes that the film translation must in no way change the original message of the film, which is confirmed by the three film translators, even though they have different opinions on the broadly perceived guidelines.

After the translators have translated the script, the synchronisation team at Haroun Studios transforms it into subtitles synchronised with the media content. In this regard, two of the translators I interviewed confirm that they receive a censored version of the script and/or media content, noting that sometimes the synchronisation team might notify the person(s) in charge at the translation company of any scene or translation that might be inappropriate and should be censored. In that way, the practices of censorship are shared among the various stakeholders in the industry before the state’s censor examines the AV material.

After a film is translated and subtitled, Empire or Haroun send it back to Deluxe Studios in London, where both the translation and the synchronisation of the subtitles with the scenes are examined. Deluxe Studios has translation and synchronisation teams and works collaboratively with Haroun Studios and other film translation companies in Lebanon to provide linguistic and technical feedback and advice. It is important to note that Deluxe Studios plays a vital role in the entire system of foreign film translation and distribution. Their role goes beyond the revision of the translation and subtitles of films; at times, for example, they assume the role of the mediator between the exhibitor and the producer or production companies. Thus, Deluxe Studios, in coordination with Empire, follow up on the film from the moment it is selected until it is translated, revised, and ready for shipping and distribution.

5.4. Foreign film importation and distribution

When the final version has been approved by all parties – the producer, the exhibitor, and Deluxe Studios – it is shipped to Lebanon, where Eid begins distributing the film to the receiving Middle Eastern countries. Foreign films are shipped to Lebanon and then to the rest of the Arab world in sealed DCP’s that arrive in each country as any other import through Customs. Each country’s board of censors (or its equivalent) receives the sealed DCP and then examines and classifies the film. By the time a film arrives at the department of censors in each Arab country, the process of distribution is finalised. However, this does not mean that the exhibitor’s job is finished because even at this stage, the exhibitor maintains a follow-up role that entails constant communication with the censors in any given country until the film is officially classified. At this stage, the exhibitor plays the role of a mediator between the censors and the film producer, via Deluxe Studios in London, especially when the censors request removing scenes deemed controversial to the culture or laws of the censors’ own country. Once the censors and the producer (via the exhibitor) reach a deal regarding a given film, it is classified according to age ratings. However, if no deal is agreed between these parties, the film will not be screened in the country that requested more (or different) censorship. Commenting on this specific practice, Eid confirms that even the decision to ban a film outright might arise from the producer and censors failing to reach a deal rather than from a classification decision censors make.

6. Censorship in the system of foreign film exhibition

In the preceding review of the system of film exhibition, I argued that censorship occurs through each agent’s compliance with a set of implicit guidelines. These guidelines are derived from the preferences that are based on the exhibitor’s experiences and knowledge of the cultures of the receiving countries. From the first stage of selecting the films to be distributed, the exhibitor makes decisions on behalf of all censors in the Arab world, and through them on behalf of many thousands of cinema-goers. Needless to say, this knowledge and expertise are important, however, commercial success is a priority in this situation. In fact, commercial success for all the parties that financially benefit from film screenings may mean many important films will never be screened in the Arab world. Furthermore, the criteria discussed above are doubtlessly inaccurate in some situations because they are generic and disregard each country’s own cultural preferences based on its own political, historical, religious, moral and societal contexts, which are constantly shifting. These criteria treat the Arab world uniformly while considering the commercial success of films rather than their artistic or aesthetic merit.

When the selected films proceed to be scene-filtered, censorship is also enforced in its most obvious manifestations: cutting off scenes. Likewise, this filtering process does not consider the multiple cultural differences in censorship across Arab countries. This process aims to achieve the highest commercial success by preparing films in line with the strictest forms of censorship practiced in the Arab world. Therefore, only one version of each selected film is distributed in the Arab world rather than different versions suitable for the cultures of the different receiving countries. Throughout the entire system, the agents involved are verifying that censorship – or euphemisation as these agents sometimes call it – takes place if necessary.

Further, both distribution companies and film theatres in the Arab world seek to avoid showing controversial films that are likely to be banned. This means that the system that precedes classifying films in the receiving countries is not simply a foreign film importation and distribution system but rather a censorial one. Consequently, the exhibitor implements censorial practices that would mitigate the chance of having the film banned. The role of these agents, including the exhibitor and the system they operate within is not to perform censorship for any reason of complicity with higher authorities but rather to facilitate the processes of importation, translation, and distribution. Like the processes detailed above, censorship remains at the heart of the translators’ practices while producing a film translation. In the following discussion, I reflect on the role of film translators in the entire system of foreign film exhibition in the Arab world based mainly on my interviews with the three film translators.

7. Censorship in the translation of foreign films

It is argued that translated texts are more targeted by censorial practices than non-translated texts (Billiani, 2007). Thus, this study takes for granted the existence of censorship in film translation because the

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4 Deluxe Studios is a world-leading company that functions as a global partner to AV creators and distributors. Website: https://www.bydelux.com/en/.

5 DCP is the Digital Cinema Package, which is a collection of digital files used to store and convey digital cinema audio, image, and data streams. DCP was generated by the Digital Cinema Initiatives when digital cinema began to replace the 35mm film screening in cinemas around the world between 2005 and 2009.
many textual examples of how the translations of films can be manipulated to adapt them to certain cultural contexts suggest that censorship in this context is routine. In addition, what the three translators discuss throughout the interviews demonstrates that censorship is one of the major challenges translators encounter when translating AV texts. In this sense, the three translators express their irritation with the censorship imposed on their work. Rania, for example, says that “the effect of censorship on film translation is very negative”; likewise, Nelly maintains that the effect of censorship (on translation) is “huge”. However, Carole has a slightly different opinion regarding her work as a translator for Haroun Studios in particular. She says, “as a translator, I feel more comfortable working for Haroun Studios as they do not ask me to translate anything (any film) in a manipulated way.” Each of the three translators expressed a different degree of irritation (or even lack of it) with censorship in translation of films translated for Haroun; this implies that each translator has a different experience even in the slightest and most basic aspects of their job.

7.1. Censorial guidelines imposed on film translators

To begin with, the answers as to whether there are censorial guidelines imposed by Haroun vary. Carole, for instance, confirms that the only censorial guidelines she has are from Screens International rather than from Haroun Studios. Further, she confirms that even if she is assigned a controversial film to translate for Haroun, the studio does not give her any guidelines for dealing with controversial parts. As a translator, she is still aware of the controversy of certain terms deemed culturally inappropriate, such as expletives. She usually considers the guidelines provided by Screens as these guidelines clarify how such terms should be translated into Arabic. As for Rania and Nelly, the situation is different since both translators are provided with general guidelines from Haroun Studios. These guidelines include sensitive terms associated with religious and moral topics and alternative translations deemed more culturally appropriate in the Arab world.

As for the scripts that each translator receives, and whether or not these scripts are censored in advance, Rania and Nelly confirm that they receive censored scripts, while Carole believes that the film scripts she receives are not. Of course, considering Eid’s comments in this regard, we know that all the film scripts sent to Lebanon to be translated and then disseminated in the Arab world are censored. Carole is the only translator not to receive post-translation feedback or engage in negotiations with Haroun Studios regarding translating problematic parts of the script. Nelly and Rania, on the other hand, are both engaged in conversations with Haroun Studios either while translating or after translating the script. Each translator reflects differently on this specific part of the process. For example, Nelly mentions that she might sometimes encounter a controversial scene that has not been censored by Haroun Studios or the client – Empire or other distribution companies in this case. In this situation, she contacts Haroun to ascertain whether she needs to translate the scene or it should be cut. She adds that sometimes she has to wait for a day or more until a decision is made. For her, a cut scene means less worry about censorship and how she is supposed to deal with it. If, on the other hand, the controversial scene is left uncut, she is given the responsibility of producing a proper translation that considers the target audience, who will still have access to the original text through the AV content (in the case of subtitling). As for Rania, she discusses her translations with both Haroun and Deluxe Studios. She says that sometimes she might receive comments on specific parts of the script and how they should be translated; at other times, she might be given feedback on her work by Deluxe Studios.

The interviews with these translators have uncovered important facts about AV translators’ roles. The first and most important comment on AV translators’ roles is that despite the influence they have on the translated texts, their role is constrained and limited in some way. These translators are controlled by guidelines that they cannot disregard as it affects the flow of their work, and sometimes their reputation. However, translators are the agents equipped with the linguistic and cultural tools that allow them to solve a translational problem that might arise due to cultural, censorial, or purely linguistic aspects of the text. For this reason, the selected terminology to render the texts from English into Arabic and the translational solutions influence decisions made entirely by the translators. However, inescapably, even these translational decisions are influenced by the censorial apparatus and/or by their cultural backgrounds. Thus, reacting to these influences means that translators might sometimes resist adhering to censorship, adhere fully to the censorial guidelines, work in terms of habitual practice, or even practise self-censorship unwittingly. A full range of behaviours here might be better explained in context.

7.2. Film translators’ behaviours in response to censorial guidelines

Unlike machines that are notionally free from ideological bias, translators operate within cultural and ideological contexts. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to assume that translators can separate themselves from their background, which affects to a certain degree their behaviour when translating a text which is dense with cultural references. A translator’s background might, in any given situation, impact their choices in their careers. As a result, translators might resist taking on a job translating an AV text that contradicts their religious or political backgrounds, despite them knowing that such a choice might affect their workflow and reputation in this highly competitive industry. One example from Carole’s experience is when her claim that she refused to translate ‘pig’ into ‘حَمَل’ (filthy) animal, instead of using its Arabic equivalent, which is ‘حَمَل’ (filthy) animal. However, according to her, Haroun Studios imposed their choice of translation on her and told her that the entire scene would be cut later. Another example from Carole’s experience is refusing to translate ‘church’ into ‘مَقْرَة’ [a place of worship], instead of using its Arabic equivalent, which is ‘مَسْجِد’ (mosque). However, Carole argues that she is not aware of the effect of such resistance and, at times, is not sure whether Haroun Studios keep their uncensored translations of ‘pig’ and ‘church’, or if they change them to the censored version that complies with the terminology set out in the guidelines. In the first instance, her refusal to translate ‘pig’ into ‘a (filthy) animal’ stems from her professional concern – she justifies her translation choice saying “most people (cinema-goers) know English nowadays”, meaning that with this censored translation the translator will be using inaccurate terminology. However, in the second situation, refusing to translate ‘church’ into ‘a place of worship’, Carole is influenced by her religious background, concretely her Christian religious belief that leads her to give an accurate term for her place of worship, which is the church, instead of using the censored Arabic translation of the term.

However, sometimes, translators exhibit habitual behaviours or practices that stem from the translator’s internalisation of what a translation of AV material should include. Such habitual behaviour is exhibited by Carole when she confirms that she has not received any censorial guidelines from Haroun. Yet, she censors her translation of the films that are sent back to Haroun. As a result, Carole still censors sensitive terms such as ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ as she refuses to use the Arabic equivalents to render these terms. Similarly, Nelly explains that sometimes she is faced with terms for which she would use one Arabic translation rather than another. She believes one translational choice to be distasteful to use in the Arabic subtitles. For example, Nelly refuses to use the Arabic term ‘مَصْبَح’ to translate ‘vomit’ or ‘throw up’ and would rather translate them into ‘ضَرْدَش’ (vomit) as she considers it a more formal and ‘less disgusting’ term to use. Nelly’s decision is likely not undertaken for censorship purposes but rather avoiding the use of a distasteful reference in Arabic, especially because the distasteful reference is associated with the general taboo of bodily functions (Al-Adwan, 2009, p.166). The two examples might seem trivial, but from them we can learn that habitual behaviour is not necessarily based on a moral consideration, but rather springs from an unconscious bias that is the result of a more deeply-rooted and scarcely articulated moral or
ideological position. The translators thus resort to euphemisation willingly, especially since in none of the examples described, the translators were told to manipulate, change, or censor themselves. Though it should be noted that for the terms ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’, the translator might have opted for censored translations, despite the absence of guidelines from Haroun, based on her own experience with other translation agencies that do provide censorial guidelines. But does this mean that every manipulative or censorial practice on part of the translators is necessarily imposed by the guidelines?

This is unlikely because sometimes translators, similar to writers, might willingly practise self-censorship. A straightforward and obvious form of self-censorship happens when a translator refuses to translate a text. One example is The Da Vinci Code (2006) and its story. Carole said that had she been asked to translate the film when it arrived in Lebanon, she would have declined the job as the narrative contradicts her religious beliefs. Thus, despite the fact that the film arrived and was translated in Lebanon, Carole expressed her disinterest in translating a film she believes does not represent her own religious beliefs, even if the film is not censored by the board of censors in Lebanon. This decision may undoubtedly be interpreted as an extreme example of conscious self-censorship.

Another situation in which translators are not necessarily influenced by their own backgrounds and ideologies is when they adhere to the guidelines. The three translators I have interviewed stress that most, if not all, of what is included in the censorial guidelines does not conform to their conventions and beliefs of what a translation of an AV text should be like. Translators adhere to the censorial guidelines when translating AV texts, including films, in various situations when they face a controversial term or expression that is politically, religiously, or morally problematic. They adhere to these guidelines despite their awareness that the suggested translations of terms such as ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israeli’ sacrifice precision and that many viewers are aware of the correct meanings of these terms. Thus, their adherence to these guidelines is an unavoidable aspect of working as a film translator in the Arab world, where many topics are still considered taboo. These translators have argued that they would rather be functional and pragmatic even if adherence might result in negative feedback on their translations from the viewers. The three translators have emphasised that in instances of adhering to the guidelines, it is very likely that the viewers ascribe such inaccuracies in the translations (subtitles) to the film translator. Some viewers might even describe the translator as ill-informed or even an ‘idiot’. What might be concluded from these practices is that the AV translator is, according to Carole, “helpless, powerless, miserable, and mistreated”. Abiding by clients’ rules and guidelines and considering the commercial factor, for Rania, indeed restrict the translators’ freedom to translate controversial terms in more fitting and impact ways.

However, this does not mean that translators do not have other ways to deal with censorship, especially given that censorship in foreign films, in general, and in film translation, in particular, is gradually becoming more permissive, according to the translators themselves. Although the translators do not discuss these translational behaviours as direct practices, such behaviours demonstrate that translators might sometimes test the censor by not following certain rules associated with certain parts of the AV text. For example, Nelly states that the expression ‘to have (or having) sex with’ is included in the guidelines as a controversial one to be translated as  simplistic and [like]. However, according to her, the translation of this expression was modified later to be translated as  [to have a relationship or an affair] – an expression that is closer in meaning to the original text. Yet, Nelly decides to test the censorial guidelines by translating this expression, and other similar ones, into  [be intimate with], an expression that is even closer to the original text. Although the translation that Nelly has opted for is a formal one used in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), as this term is directly related to the context of a sexual encounter, it is still a risky one to use. However, Nelly’s attempt was successful because she stated that had the translation not been accepted by Haroun or the client, she would have been contacted and told not to use it again in her translations; therefore, it became a practice she could repeat. This practice suggests that translators have various ways of dealing with censorship, especially that, as these translators confirmed, censorship of translation in the Arab world is becoming less rigid nowadays. To reflect upon such a change towards leniency in the context of translation, I discuss examples of translations used by the three translators relating to different topics.

### 7.3. Shifting towards leniency in translating cultural taboos

According to the interviewed translators, Arabic cultures and societies are shifting towards more openness and liberalism in terms of binary choices between what is moral and what is immoral, and what might be publicly expressed or represented. These shifts have also impacted the industry of foreign film exhibition including the process of translation where translators are acting according to such shifts (and, indeed, may be said to be influencing them). One example of a shift is the adoption of new translations of terms associated with homosexuality. Terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are translated as  and  respectively. These two terms and similar terms were derogatorily translated in the past – specifically into  – a person who practices sexual perversion (Collins Dictionaries, 2015). Since the old Arabic terms are now globally considered derogatory and offensive (Quishua and Ostler, 2020), the censors have adopted new terms.

Another indication of this developing leniency is a recent change in the translation practices for both television and cinema is translating alcoholic drinks in AV content into Arabic. While general, less accurate translations were imposed on translations of any alcoholic drink in the past, Carole and Nelly confirmed that accurate translations are now used in Arabic. For example, ‘wine’, ‘whisky’, and ‘beer’ were translated as  [grape juice],  [juice], and  [barley drink], respectively. The translations were then adjusted to a more relevant Arabic term  – an invert or alcoholic drink. However, nowadays, these three names of alcoholic drinks can be translated as  or  – respectively, if the translation is to be screened in less conservative Middle-Eastern countries only. This practice of replacing the old derogatory terms with more specific but neutral ones indicates progress towards more leniency in dealing with certain taboos. Furthermore, this practice is confirmed by the translators, the exhibitor, and the film classifiers in Jordan. It is this openness and developing liberalism that might be considered as underpinning the decision of translators like Nelly to test the censors’ acceptance of her translation of ‘having sex’ as  – which is contrary to the clients’ rules and guidelines and considering the commercial factor, for Rania, indeed restrict the translators’ freedom to translate controversial terms in more fitting and impact ways.

### 8. Summary and conclusions

This research helped shed light on the system of foreign film exhibition in commercial film theatres in the AME countries – a system that has been obscure for so long. The main argument of this study was that censorship, which is de facto in the production and dissemination of various forms of expression and entertainment, namely commercial films, is imposed by state censors and various actors involved in the system of film exhibition. Additionally, this study argued that censorship is imposed in this specific context to enable rather than prohibit the exhibition of films. This is because more stringent measures, particularly, outright bans, can be avoided if various censorial measures such as cutting out scenes or manipulating the translation of foreign films are imposed.

To corroborate this argument, I conducted interviews with key agents engaged in the processes of translation, censorship, exhibition, distribution, and finally, classification in the context of foreign film in the target countries. In consequence, the interviews with film classifiers in Jordan, foreign film translators whose translations are screened across the Arab world, and a foreign film exhibitor allowed this research to...
address key aspects. The first aspect is the system that consists of processes through which films go before they are approved for screening; and the second aspect is the role of film translators in this system and in imposing censorship.

Two major findings are demonstrated in this: first, censorship in the context of foreign film exhibition in the AME is not implemented by official censors only. Self-imposed manipulation and censorship are practised as well by the different agents concerned with creation, production, distribution, translating, and other processes in this context. In this sense, censorship imposed is not always necessarily restrictive as it is likely to be enabling, especially in the Arab world where state censorship has become more lenient. Yet, various agents still practice it to ensure the commercial success of commercial cinemas.

The second major finding is that foreign films to be screened in film theatres across the AME are governed by a regional system. In this system, important decisions are made regarding the target countries in two major centres in Lebanon and London. These major stakeholders also act as a middle-man between film producers and classifiers after film classifiers receive a film. The fact that such a system is in operation indicates a level of communication among the major parties that aim to obtain screenable films in the receiving countries. In this regard, the agents concerned with the system are not in a place to challenge censorship. Rather, they choose to operate and conform to what is acceptable by censorial laws or by the receiving cultures to avoid the most extreme form of censorship, namely, outright banning. In this system, different agents have different strategies to deal with censorship, ranging from observing the censorial guidelines to testing the water by pushing certain boundaries.

Although the data provided by the interviewed exhibitors, censors, and translators was invaluable and abundant, the main limitation that this research study encountered was the scarcity of resources. Indeed, not only publications on foreign film translation in the context of censorship are scarce, but also, I was unable to locate any archives that comprise data on the banned or censored foreign films whether in Jordan or other Arab (Middle-Eastern) countries.

To enrich research in this specific area, I recommend researchers interested in investigating censorship in cinema to include more participants involved in the system of foreign film exhibition. For instance, researchers may interview participants from distribution companies other than Empire, which is one among several distribution and exhibition companies, to gauge the extent of consistency of the system in operation. Furthermore, to broaden the research in this field, I recommend that the system of foreign AV content broadcast on television in the Arab world, especially on pan-Arab channels such as MBC and OSN, to be closely examined as to find answers to similar questions this study posed.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Isra Alqudah: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Funding statement

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

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