

# Recontextualizing Nouvelle Vague cinema in Québec

Leonard Cohen, subtitler of Claude Jutra's *À tout prendre*

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In this contribution, we examine the relationship between text and context in multimodal translation practices by focusing on the Québécois film *À tout prendre* (1963; directed by Claude Jutra) and its English version, *Take It All* (translated by Leonard Cohen). The first two sections provide contextual information, while Section 3 is dedicated to a comparative analysis, in which a more central role is given to the film itself and to the archival documents (such as draft versions of the French script and the English translation). On the whole, *Take It All* results from a complex interplay of factors: the overuse of reduction (condensation and deletion) despite the absence of spatial or temporal limitations; Cohen's limited translation experience, combined with his influential profile as an artist; and the assumed intended target audience. The subtitles serve as an ancillary device, offering a minimalist representation of the original dialogue. Regarding the linguistic transfer itself, no misunderstandings have been encountered, although the translation can be said to diverge substantially from the original in numerous respects. Consequently, the English version exhibits a less intricate network of interrelationships and it can be argued that the subtitles have not significantly contributed to the film's internationalization journey.

**Keywords:** multimodality, audiovisual translation, subtitling, Leonard Cohen, Claude Jutra

In this contribution, we adopt an inductive method to study the relationship between text and context in multimodal translation practices and zoom in on the comparison between the Québécois film *À tout prendre* (1963) and its English

translation *Take It All*, which, to date, has not been subject to analysis. This gap in the research is quite remarkable, not only because of the place the original film and its director, Claude Jutra, hold in film history but also because the English translator is another Canadian celebrity, Leonard Cohen. As we will demonstrate, everything points to the fact that the translation was done in a non-professional context and that the subtitles reflect a predominantly logocentric approach. By opting for a broad focus, we do not confine ourselves to linguistic aspects and/or the translation product but adopt a multimodal perspective that allows us to pay attention to the sociosemiotic context of the film. This contextual information is mainly presented in Sections 1 (the original film) and 2 (the English version) and is subsequently integrated into the actual comparative analysis (Section 3), where a more central role is given to the film itself (English and French), and to the archival documents containing the draft versions of the French script and the English translation. The examples scrutinized in the comparative analysis retain a pronounced multimodal character and offer a representative insight into Leonard Cohen's subtitling strategy.

### 1. *À tout prendre*: An important film that has long stayed under the radar

*À tout prendre* (1963) is among the best-known films of Claude Jutra (1930–1986), one of the most prominent representatives of the *nouvelle vague québécoise*, and of Canadian cinema in general, whose work also frequently garnered international awards. As a French-speaking Montrealer, he focused primarily on the French-Canadian market in his early days with (mainly) French-language films. Although this Francophone affiliation also had a political motivation – Jutra was an ardent separatist – his outspoken commitment did not prevent him from becoming increasingly involved in English language projects and collaborations starting in the second half of the 1970s, partly due to a lack of financial support. In the years before the English collaborations, he had been actively involved in Québec's struggle for independence and had released two of his acclaimed films: *Mon oncle Antoine* (My Uncle Antoine; 1970), considered by many to be one of the best films ever made in Canada (Patry 2013); and *À tout prendre* (1963).

Released as *All Things Considered* in Canada and *Take It All* in the United States in 1964, *À tout prendre* is an autobiographical story focusing on the romantic relationship of a young Québécois intellectual, Claude, played by Jutra

himself, with a young black actress and model, Johanne Harrelle.<sup>1</sup> In this struggle with his own identity, his life choices, and his interracial affair, Claude is also confronted with his latent homosexual desires, which complicate his amorous relationship with Johanne. The film is set against the backdrop of the so-called *Révolution tranquille* (Quiet Revolution) of the 1960s. Shot in black and white, the geographical and temporal framework are clearly visible: the characters appear in many typical Montréal street settings, and in one scene the main character walks past a facade with *Québec libre* (free Québec) chalked in large letters (01:37:05).

*À tout prendre* not only acquired fame for its social relevance but also for its artistry, as the film is considered by many to be a milestone in Canadian film history. Claude Jutra (in Wakeman 1988, 485) himself once let slip that *À tout prendre* contains “most of what I would ever have to say on film,” and Jutras (2014a; online, our translation) later described the film as

The first feature-length fiction film of an autobiographical nature made in Quebec and shot using the methods and techniques of direct cinema. Because of its unusual aesthetics, related to the intimate and libertarian expression of the characters of Claude and Johanne, the film provoked a mixture of admiring astonishment and righteous indignation on its release. Claude Jutra boldly relives his own love affair with Johanne Harrelle, who was to become the first black model in Montreal’s haute couture industry. For the first time in America, a bed scene between a white man and a black woman was filmed. The two freely confess to each other, with this game of truth prompting Johanne to inquire about Claude’s likely homosexuality.

Given the significance of *À tout prendre*, it should come as no surprise that the film has been studied extensively in francophone circles (Brady 1988; Moffat 1991), though international acclaim came rather late. Arguably, part of this lack of worldwide projection can be put down to the fact that access to the English language version of the film was quite difficult for many decades. Indeed, the January 1988 issue of the *Revue de la Cinémathèque* indicated that the English version of the film was only shown for the first time at the *Cinémathèque* on the 7th of January of that year, that is, 25 years after the launch of the film. In this same issue’s weekly programming, the film’s announcement included the following explicit note: “This version, whose text has been written by Leonard Cohen, has never been shown at the *Cinémathèque*” (*La Revue de la Cinémathèque* 1988, 41; our translation). To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the movie, a colloquium was organized at the *Cinémathèque québécoise* in 2014,

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1. Her name has been written as both “Joanne” and “Johanne” in the dialogue list, and it appears spelled as “Johanne” in a credit of the actual film (06:43). The latter spelling is used in the English subtitles and in this article.

and a trove of archival documents was made publicly available online, including various copies of the film.<sup>2</sup> The English version of the film was also remastered for the occasion and made available online (see Section 3). Among the archival documents kept by the *Cinémathèque québécoise*, there is, in addition to a type-written script of the English translation (see Appendix 1), a type-written copy of the original French script, with Leonard Cohen's translation notes (see Appendix 2), which is not available online.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *Take It All* as a recontextualization of *À tout prendre*

Understanding recontextualization as “literally, moving ‘meaning-material’ from one context, with its social organization of participants and its modal ensembles, to another, with its different social organization and modal ensembles” (Bezemer and Kress 2016, 75), the first question to be asked is: for which new context(s) and audience(s) was the English translation of *À tout prendre* intended? We argue here that the subtitled version, at the time, allowed the distributors to reach both an anglophone audience *within* Canada, who could easily understand the socio-semiotic references of the movie, such as the Quiet Revolution, and an international audience *outside* Canada, who knew little about the social intertext but was familiar with the artistic codes of Nouvelle Vague cinema.

“I’m learning a whole new vocabulary” (Cohen n.d.), Leonard Cohen wrote to poet John Glassco in January 1964, the year Cohen received Québec’s Literary Competition Prize for his first novel, *The Favorite Game*. The two had met in October of the previous year at the Foster Poetry Conference in the Eastern Townships. In this letter to Glassco, Cohen shares his experience of translating the French script of *À tout prendre*, and hints at another translation he is set to do for Jutra, one that will never materialize. Perhaps this translation was nothing more than an artistic collaboration between two friendly artists, although it could also have been a linguistic and intercultural statement. After all, the CBC Television Network press release regarding the film rights to the English-language

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2. Namely, the original French-language version in 35-mm format (100 min., 56 sec.) and in 16-mm format (98 min., 55 sec.). Content wise, both versions of the film are identical and the contrast in length is due to some minor differences between each version’s opening and end credits. The 35-mm version mentions some international awards that are not acknowledged in the 16-mm, and the song played during the end credits is different in the two versions: “Tes yeux blancs,” sung by Jutra himself in the 35-mm version, and “Choucouné,” sung by Johanne in the 16-mm version. The material can be found at: <http://collections.cinematheque.qc.ca/dossiers/a-tout-prendre/2-le-film>.

3. The authors thank the *Cinémathèque* for giving us access to this valuable document.



version states that this was “the first collaboration of the kind between artists from English- and French-speaking Canada” (CBC 1964; online). Given the nature of the film, one can only guess that the translation project must have been a rather complex undertaking from the start. From a sociopolitical perspective, even though there were many informal artistic networks between English- and French-speaking Canadians at the time, especially in a multicultural city such as Montréal, a French-/English-language collaboration on a controversial film at the time of the *Révolution tranquille* was no innocent gesture. The choice of an already famous artist such as Cohen, with limited knowledge of the French language and little or no experience as a translator, comes across as an intriguing decision. The close relationship between Jutra and Cohen – Robert Hershorn, co-producer of *À tout prendre*, was a mutual friend (Jutras 2014b) – and presumably, their sharing of similar artistic values can be adduced as a sufficient reason for such collaboration. Arguably, the choice can also be put down to an attempt to raise the visibility and appeal of the film by securing collaboration in the project of some of the best-known intellectual figures of the time.

The English translation is also an attempt to break through internationally. When Cohen called the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Hollywood to have the French-language film accepted into the foreign film category of the Academy Awards, his request fell on deaf ears (Mus 2020, 232), illustrating how difficult it was for a French-language work to be picked up in the international *commercial* circuit. Instead, with *À tout prendre*, Jutra firmly places himself in the international *arthouse* movement of the Nouvelle Vague. The setting of 1960s Québec is very visible. This is evident both in the images (the urban setting of Montréal, the visual references to the Quiet Revolution) as well as in the social and societal relationships between the characters (e.g., the scene in which a Catholic priest gives his view on Claude’s amorous relationship with a married woman). In addition, the frequent meta-commentaries and the combination of dialogue and inner monologue clearly make *À tout prendre* an arthouse film for a select group of viewers, both in terms of numbers and sociological profile (highly educated, culturally inclined people). Given the specific and often highbrow artistic codes used throughout the film, there is no reason to believe that the profile of the new English-speaking audience would be radically different from that of the original audience, and it can be safely assumed that the English-language film found its way to a group of viewers whose intellectual profile closely matched that of the original audience. A telling example is the cameo of François Truffaut in the original movie, which shows the close contact between the Québécois and French artistic circles.

Although Cohen was born and raised in the bilingual city of Montréal, he only had a passive command of French. This is evident in the annotated script, which contains interesting, handwritten comments in pen (see Figure 2) about how he proceeded with the translation. The 36-page type-written document is divided into three distinct sections, corresponding to the three reels that make up the film: reel 1 (14 pages), reel 2 (11 pages), and reel 3 (10 pages). According to Jutra's confession, neither the screenplay nor the dialogue exchanges had been written out in advance: "After having discussed it among themselves before each scene, actors would improvise as we went along. The sound was always recorded live" (in Jutras 2014a; online; our translation). As a postproduction task, someone was responsible for typing out the dialogue exchanges and offscreen narration that could be heard in the recorded soundtrack. Thus, in its initial incarnation, this working document was of a very basic nature and only contained the original French script, the names of the characters, as well as onomatopoeias – *poum-poum-poum* – and some nonverbal elements indicated between parentheses – *sifflement* [whistling], *rires* [laughter], *chant* [singing] –, flippant observations such as *hennissement à la Claude Jutra* [neighing in a Claude Jutra fashion] and defeatist observations like *incompréhensible* [incomprehensible]. On occasions, substantial parts of the text were left out, as can be seen in Figure 1, presumably due to the poor quality of the sound, rendering it very challenging to make out what the actors were actually enunciating. Both dialogue and inner monologue are recorded in the document, but the distinction between the two is not explicitly indicated in this original script.

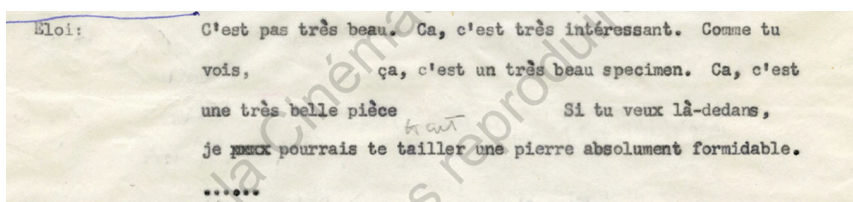
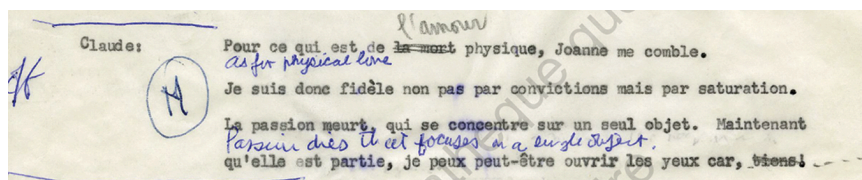


Figure 1. Blank spaces found in reel 1, p. 7. 1984.0049.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

To address some of these shortcomings, easily readable handwriting text has been added in French, in pencil, though it is not clear who the author might be. Some of the notes on the left margin are used to distinguish between "voice" (onscreen dialogue) and "off-voice" (offscreen narration). In this first passing in pencil, corrections and additions have been added to modify and/or complete some of the actors' lines that had been erroneously recorded in the typed document, as they did not follow the final recorded exchanges. Had they made it to

the English subtitles, some of the mishearings in this copy of the document could have had pernicious consequences in the understanding of the plot, as Figure 2 shows, in which the uttered noun *amour* [love] had been initially recorded as *mort* [death]:



**Figure 2.** Corrections of initial postproduction script, reel 1, p. 6, with the two types of handwriting – the one in blue ink is Cohen’s. 1984.0049.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

With these modifications and corrections, the final document is a quasi-complete transcript of the spoken text in the film, though a substantial number of deficiencies and discrepancies can still be spotted between the actual soundtrack and the “corrected” lines recorded in the script.

Typical of that period and in contrast with what can be observed in current practice (Díaz-Cintas 2001; Richart Maset 2012), the dialogue list does not accommodate any annotations that could have helped the translator with the linguistic and cultural transfer. It is for this reason that the copy safeguarded at the *Cinémathèque québécoise* is of extraordinary archival value in as much as it incorporates a vast array of handwritten indications in blue ink that belong to Cohen himself (Figure 2). They take the form of potential translation solutions, frequently punctuated by question marks, and, hence, foreground the areas that the translator might have found challenging when transferring French into English. In this sense, Cohen’s notes can be read primarily as a first (sight) translation, which is the reason why the translation is far from complete and differs in several respects from the final version found on screen. On occasion, sentences or parts of sentences are partially or entirely translated using idiomatic English equivalents. In these cases, the source text is not very complex, but the translation was presumably written down because a ready-made idiomatic equivalent was easy to find, e.g., “Je vais rentrer chez moi” / “I’m going home” (reel 1, p. 4). In other cases, individual words or phrases are translated, probably with the intention of acquiring a better understanding of specific passages in the source text (e.g., *bouffer* > “eat,” reel 1, p. 8). In addition, Cohen occasionally added a meta-commentary about the style or context of certain passages, e.g., “keep a formal tone” (reel 1, p. 2); “Rimbaud,” when some verses by the French poet are quoted (reel 1, p. 2); “joke,” when an exchange is meant to be humorous (reel 1, p. 8); “in

bed,” when the intimacy of the action may have a bearing on the lexical choice (reel 1, p.9); and “untranslatable pun” (reel 2, p.6). Along the same lines, other types of comments can be found, proving that Cohen incorporated extralinguistic information in preparation for the final translation. In a fairly systematic manner and complementing the imperfect annotations made by the person who used the pencil, Cohen wrote “off” in the left margins to demarcate the use of inner monologue and “dialogue” to highlight the more colloquial, onscreen verbal exchanges.

All this makes the comparison of *À tout prendre* and *Take It All* a complex but interesting case for research, particularly when considering the potential agency and the amount of freedom of action of the translator, Leonard Cohen, who had a foot both inside and outside Claude Jutra’s social space. Secondly, through an analysis of the subtitles, we will argue that some features of the film allowed Cohen to provide an atypical translation, seeing himself not only as a translator but also as a co-author.

### 3. Analysis of the English translation

Despite the iconic stature of *À tout prendre*, no analysis has been conducted on its translation into English, partly, as already mentioned, because until 2014, it was quite difficult to access the English-language version of the film. The fact that both Jutra’s and Cohen’s lives have been extensively documented in biographies of all kinds does not change the fact that their mutual collaboration is discussed nowhere. In Jutra’s biography, the English version of the film is briefly mentioned (Leach 1999, 67), but no further details are provided. This blind spot alone in the research on the oeuvre of both Jutra and Cohen makes an analysis of the English translation of *À tout prendre* valuable.

First of all, it should be noted that neither the original movie nor the French script explicitly refers to Cohen, while in the English film, the closing credits do mention his name in a prominent fashion, as displayed in Figure 3:

The image of Cohen-as-translator is confirmed in the scant secondary bibliography that exists on *Take It All* (Leach 1999). However, this representation is inaccurate as Cohen not only worked on the French post factum, i.e., as a translator but he was also involved in the original film’s production from the very beginning. In the original, he briefly appears as a guitarist, with no spoken lines. He also gives life to two secondary characters, a photographer and a dancer, and as such utters a few sentences in French, offscreen, but still enough to grant him a mention of his name in the English script. There is no indication that he co-wrote the screenplay, but the thematic relationship between *À tout prendre* and his own work is unmistakable, as argued by Carrier-Lafleur (2014). Indeed, on the



**Figure 3.** Credit of Leonard Cohen. Courtesy of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

last page of the French typescript (reel 3, p.9), he noted in the margin the title of his first novel, *The Favourite Game*, as if to highlight a potential connection between the final scene of the movie and his own novel, also published in 1963.

Furthermore, there was the artistic dimension, which led to the choice of two different audiovisual translation practices to deal with the original text. The alternation in the original version of streetwise, onscreen dialogue and intricate, offscreen inner monologue is emphasized even more in the English version, where the French dialogue lines have been translated by means of subtitles, while the inner monologue voice-off has been replaced with a new soundtrack containing the text in English and voiced by Jutra and Harrelle themselves. Unlike traditional voiceover, where the original dialogue can still be heard at a lower volume while the translation is overlaid (Díaz-Cintas and Orero 2010), the procedure adopted in *Take It All* is more akin to narration, as the original utterances have been wiped out and only the English text can be heard, with a subtle hint of French accent that lingers in the pronunciation of the two actors and reminds the viewer of the foreignness of the production.

Prior to the digitization of the film in 2014, the English version only existed on VHS cassette with subtitles. In the remastered version, the decision was taken to re-use the same subtitles rather than produce a retranslation, presumably because of the historical added value of Cohen's authorship. Nonetheless, the opportunity was seized to present the text following a different, more contemporary layout, as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5.

As can be seen, there is a striking visual difference between the first English subtitles, as they appear on the VHS tape, and those of the digitized version. In the analog copy, sentences are displayed in a very large font, taking up a substantial part of the image, while in the remastered copy, the subtitles resort to a smaller font size, and some of the one-liners have been reconverted into two-liners. Unsurprisingly, the former is less compliant with contemporary subtitling layout parameters than the latter, though this does not mean that the digital

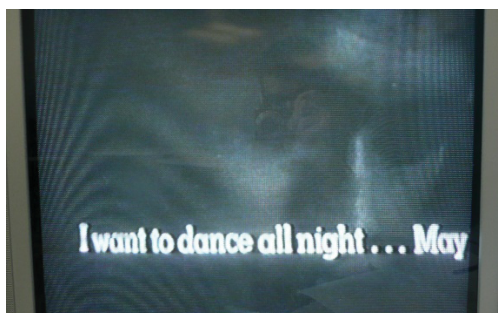


Figure 4. Analogue layout of subtitles. Courtesy of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

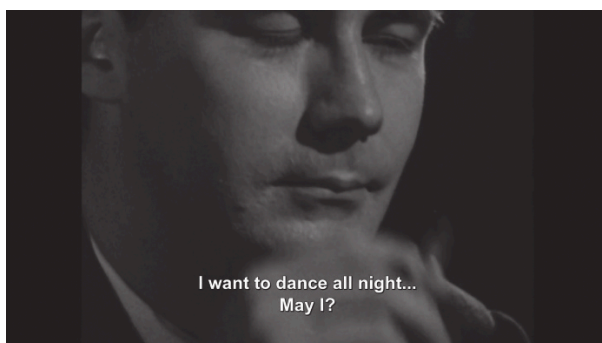


Figure 5. Digital layout of subtitles. Courtesy of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

subtitles adhere to “standard” professional practice. It can be argued that this decision is part of a recontextualization strategy to align the subtitles with the audience’s expectations of what subtitles look like, in terms of layout, in digital environments.

When first watching the English-language version, the immediate impression one gets is the fact that, from a technical perspective, the subtitles are lacking on many fronts. Synchronization with the onset and the outset of the utterances heard in the soundtrack is very loose at best, with numerous occasions on which original exchanges can be heard but no subtitles can be read. Typographic mistakes can also be observed, adding to a general sense of carelessness, with subtitles where punctuation is missing (commas, full stops...) and words wrongly spelled (“Theys ay there is no love / without jealousy,” 26:29). When it comes to the actual content, reduction through omission (Díaz-Cintas and Remael 2021) is the main translation strategy invoked and, on the whole, the dialogue is cut down to its bare essentials. This is certainly not due to spatio-temporal limitations as there is ample time to present the text, and expanding on the subtitles for these dialogue lines would have been perfectly possible. That said, the represen-

tatives of Laboratoires Titra, ultimately responsible for editing the subtitles onto the commercial print, suggested that changes could be made due to technical limitations. In a letter to Jutra, they stated: “It goes without saying that in those cases in which your subtitles are too long, we will alert you and we will ask you either permission to modify them or a new set of shorter subtitles” (Orion Films / Laboratoires Titra 1964), which seems to imply that the subtitles would only be changed due to their length and no other considerations.

Although the subtitles provide the viewer with enough information to follow the film, certain nuances contained in the original version disappear in the translation altogether. In many instances, the deletion of information is not due to technical constraints as whole exchanges are obviated while the viewer can clearly hear the characters speak on screen, and no translation is forthcoming. Arguably, such disregard of certain lexical elements has no bearing on the understanding of the plot as these are marginal asides, as in Example (1) below, where the 35 French lexical items transform into 15 English terms, despite the subtitler having 11 seconds at his disposal for a longer and more detailed translation:

Example 1.

Original dialogue (01:13:10–01:13:21)	English back translation
Claude : Je ne veux pas vous mettre de l'eau dans la bouche. C'est une fille formidable. Elle est épatante. Elle est très jolie. Et puis, surtout, au point de vue tempérament, personnalité, ça coïncide très bien.	Claude: I don't want to whet your appetite. She's a formidable girl. She is great. She is very good-looking. And then, above all, from a temperamental point of view, personality, we get along very well.
English subtitles	
I don't want to whet your appetite. She is great.	
We get along very well.	

However, on many other occasions, these adjustments do have an impact on the characterization of the protagonists, who come across as different from the portrayal displayed in the original. Example (2) contains Tania's advice to Claude, her son, after he has told her that he is having an affair with a new girlfriend, who has fallen pregnant and to whom he is thinking of getting married:

## Example 2.

Original dialogue (01:11:03–01:11:34)	English back translation
Tania : Mais, je pense à une chose. Y a quatre ou cinq ans, tu es allé faire une retraite fermée, dans un monastère, et tu as eu affaire à... à un père assez remarquable dont tu m'as parlé. Le père, le père Simon, je crois. Pourquoi n'irais-tu pas le trouver, puis lui demander conseils avant de prendre une décision définitive, hein ?	Tania: But I'm thinking of something. Four or five years ago, you went to an indoor retreat, in a monastery, and you met a... a quite remarkable priest and told me about him. Father, father Simon, I think. Why don't you go and find him, and then ask him for his advice before you take a final decision, eh?
English subtitles	
But I was just thinking:	
4 or 5 years ago	
you met a remarkable priest.	
Why don't you ask his advice	
before taking a final decision?	

The delivery of the French is unusually clear and slowly paced. Indeed, the mother takes 31 seconds to utter her lines, thus allowing for a “complete” translation of the content from a technical dimension. If we assume that the typical reading speed at the time would have been 12 characters per second (Laks 1957), the subtitler had at his disposal some 370 characters to produce the translation. However, the decision has been taken to split the original into five one-line subtitles that convert the 325 original characters into 127 in English, leading to a reduction level of 61%, which, incidentally, epitomizes the general pattern adopted throughout the whole subtitling process. In this reduction process, the translator has decided to ignore the way in which Claude got to know the priest – *tu es allé faire une retraite fermée, dans un monastère* [you went to spend an indoors spiritual retreat in a monastery] – and which can be understood to be significant not only for his spiritual characterization but also to justify the embeddedness of the scene within the film, which may come across as otherwise incoherent with Claude’s personality.

Another case in point is the deletion of the sarcastic reference that Claude makes to the *Musée Grévin*, the wax museum in Paris. As shown in Figure 6, neither the first transcription of the dialogue nor the second passing in pencil



seems to have picked up on the name of the museum; hence, blank spaces are left on the page.

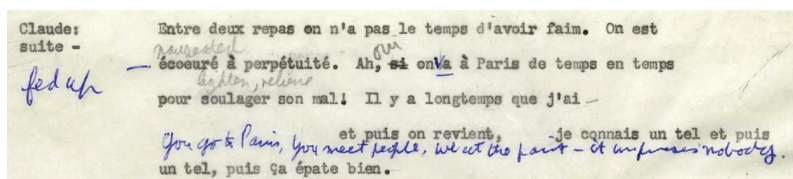


Figure 6. Reel 1, p. 6. 1984.0049.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

Such absence in the dialogue list is bound to be the reason behind the erasure of the cultural reference along with part of the rest of the exchange. Yet, when listening to the soundtrack, it is not too arduous to make out what Claude is actually saying:

Example 3.

Original dialogue (21:53–22:03)	English back translation
Claude : Ah, puis, on va à Paris pour soulager son mal. Tiens, à propos, il y longtemps que j'ai pas vu le Musée Grévin, et puis on dit j'ai rencontré un tel et puis un tel, et puis on n'épate personne, en fait.	Claude: Oh, then, you go to Paris to relieve your pain. Well, actually, it's been a long time since I was last at <i>Musée Grévin</i> , and then one can say, "I met so and then so," and then you don't impress anyone, really.
<b>English subtitles</b>	
So I go to Paris now and then...	
I come back saying "I've met so and so..."	
Nobody's impressed.	

Part of a longer monologue, whose beginning is discussed in Example (6), the main point of this tongue-in-cheek comment is to foreground Claude's malaise and feeling of being worthless. Crossing the Atlantic to visit the metropole, with the goal of "relieving one's pain" and meeting the representatives of the chattering classes of the time, is ridiculed in the original with the impromptu addendum of the reference to a visit to the wax museum in the French capital, a visit that can be interpreted as intellectually dubious and raises questions about the progressive types that one can bump into at a museum of that nature. The excessive reduction levels found in the subtitles, from 199 French characters to 88 English characters,

when 120 could have been possible, mean that the sardonic and veiled criticism of such attitude has been erased to a large extent.

Other deletions observed in the subtitles are somehow “announced” or “justified” from a diegesis point of view, as in the case of Johanne’s iconic performance at a party, celebrated early on in the film, of the nineteenth-century Haitian song “Choucouné,” based on a lyrical poem by Oswald Durant that praises the beauty of a Haitian woman of the same name. To announce that the singing is about to take place, one of the partygoers alerts the rest that *Elle va chanter en créole. Je n’y comprendrai rien mais ça ne fait rien* (She is going to sing in Creole. I won’t understand anything, but that’s OK), which gets subtitled as:

The song is in creole, so

don’t try to understand it.

In this example, the condensation of the original (52 characters in total) seems appropriate as the subtitle remains on screen for about 4 seconds (05:17–05:21), therefore showing a display rate of some 13 characters per second, in accordance with standard professional practice. The generalization incorporated in the English, “don’t try to understand,” contrasts with the idiosyncratic original, “I won’t understand,” but provides an elegant solution to justify the ensuing lack of subtitles, despite the existence of an English version of the song known as “Yellow Bird,” which became very popular in the English-speaking world in the late 1950s.

Other times, the unnecessary lack of translation can be said to have a detrimental impact on the appreciation of the original and its intertextual ramifications. A notable example is the scene in which Johanne is jokingly chatting with François Truffaut (17:50–18:09) and makes a reference to “his film,” *François, enseigne-moi le truc de la locomotive. Tu sais, comme dans ton film* [François, teach me the trick of the locomotive. You know, like in your film], to which he briefly instructs her to *souffler* [blow], in a veiled reference to his seminal film *Jules et Jim* (*Jules and Jim*, 1962), in which Thérèse smokes like a steam train. As shown in Figure 7, the original phrase by Johanne did not make it to the postproduction script, but Cohen must have realized the significance of this scene and added, in blue ink, a potential English translation of the first part of the exchange.

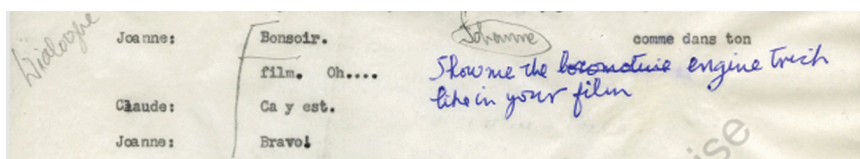


Figure 7. Reel 1, p. 5. 1984.0049.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

Despite his awareness, the final English copy omits this exchange completely, and François Truffaut ends up without a voice in the target language.

A peculiar subtitling solution, at odds with professional practice but that could be seen as an early precursor of the fansubbing fashion of adding translators' notes to the subtitles (Díaz-Cintas 2005), can be found in the scene in which Johanne informs Claude that she is pregnant. The exchange has been recorded in the postproduction script, as displayed in Figure 8.

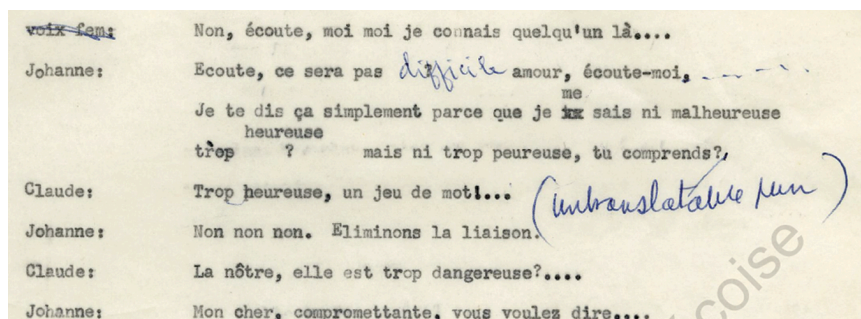


Figure 8. Reel 2, p. 6. 1984.0049.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

The actual dialogue, as transcribed directly from the soundtrack, together with the English subtitles, can be found in Example (4):

## Example 4.

Original dialogue (01:01:04–01:01:30)	English back translation
<b>Johanne:</b> Écoute, ce sera pas emmerdant, et... Mon amour, écoute-moi. Je te dis ça simplement parce que je me sais ni malheureuse, très heureuse, mais ni trop peureuse, tu comprends ?	<b>Johanne:</b> Listen, that won't be bloody problematic and... My love, listen. I'm telling you simply because I was neither unhappy, very happy, but nor too fearful, do you understand?
<b>Claude:</b> Trop heureuse, un jeu de mots.	<b>Claude:</b> Too happy, a play on words.
<b>Johanne:</b> Non non, non. Éliminons la liaison.	<b>Johanne:</b> No, no, no. Get rid of the (phonetic) liaison.
<b>Claude:</b> La nôtre, elle est trop dangereuse ?!	<b>Claude:</b> Ours, it is too dangerous?!
<b>Johanne:</b> Mon cher, compromettante, vous voulez dire.	<b>Johanne:</b> My darling, incriminating, is what you mean.
English subtitles	
	Listen.
	It won't be hard.
	I don't feel sad about it...
	Or really happy...
	Understand?
	(A TENDER UNTRANSLATABLE PUN)

The multi-layeredness of this fragment makes it a hard sequence to translate. On the level of the diegesis, this particular scene does not add much to the story. After Johanne has told Claude that she is pregnant, she tries to reassure him that everything will be fine. She finds it difficult to express her feelings, something between *malheureuse* [unhappy], *trop heureuse* [too happy], and *trop peureuse* [too fearful]. Claude is keen to avoid the matter and switches the focus of the conversation to the pun between the expressions *trop heureuse* and *trop peureuse*, which sound phonetically identical because of the *liaison* between the two constituent parts but have a very different meaning. Both Johanne and Claude continue then to communicate in a playful manner: *éliminons la liaison*, referring to both the linguistic binding between two words and the extramarital relation, Johanne says, upon which Claude wonders, *la nôtre, elle est trop*

*dangereuse?! [Ours, it is too dangerous?!]*, referring to the celebrated novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, written by Choderlos de Laclos in 1782. Cohen's translation – "A TENDER UNTRANSLATABLE PUN," in capitals – is interesting not only because he makes the viewer aware of the translated nature of the subtitles (he could have left the passage unnoticed, as he did with many other passages), but also because of his personal interpretation of the nature of the exchange between Claude and Johanne. Once again, the obliteration of the pun, as well as the intertextual reference to Laclos contribute to what Berman (1984) has coined as the "qualitative impoverishment" of a translation.

This is not an isolated case, and other exchanges built on a play on words and punctuated by a burst of laughter on screen are also left untranslated, as in the case of the exploitation of the homonymous relationship between *tromper quelqu'un* [cheat on someone] and *se tromper* [to be mistaken], illustrated in Example (5):

Example 5.

Original dialogue (25:48–25:56, Reel 1, p. 8)	English back translation
<b>Johanne:</b> Tu me trompes ?	<b>Johanne:</b> Johanne: Are you cheating on me?
<b>Claude:</b> Comment, je te trompe ? Pour te tromper il faudrait que j'aie juré fidélité. Ce n'est pas le cas. C'est toi qui te trompes.	<b>Johanne:</b> Claude: What you mean, I am cheating on you? To cheat on you, I should have pledged faithfulness. Which is not the case. You are the one being mistaken (cheating on yourself).
English subtitles	
	Were you unfaithful?
	How could I be? I never promised to be faithful.

Perhaps surprising because of the type of film and the progressive nature of its message, but, yet again, wholly aligned with traditional professional practice, is the decision to tone down the use of certain terms and expressions that can be considered offensive by some viewers (Ávila Cabrera 2023). In Example (4) above, the vulgar adjective *emmerdant*, derived from the substantive *merde* [shit], has been rendered in the subtitles as an innocuous "hard." Tellingly, the transcription (Figure 8) also shied away from a literal recording, and, in the first attempt, the adjective was not recorded at all, and a blank space was left instead, and later was singularly "misheard" as *difficile* [difficult]. Although the use of taboo language in the film is by no means emphatic, this edulcorating attitude permeates the whole

translation policy, and numerous examples can be found in the film where terms of this nature are either neutralized or deleted altogether, and a line like *Putain, qu'est-ce que j'ai, merde ?* [Fuck, what's happening to me, shit?] (21:20) has been translated as "What's the matter with me?." In this respect, stylistic standardization seems to operate on many levels. For example, the (few) passages where French and English are spoken interchangeably are rendered into monolingual English with no indication of any code-switching, and common colloquialisms, such as *hein, t'es*, and the like, are not reflected in the written English, which, to a large extent, is in line with current subtitling standards (Assis Rosa 2001).

Cohen also takes some decisions that, departing from what can be considered professional practice even at the time, add a certain degree of creativity and emotional impact to his subtitles, in what could be considered a compensatory strategy for losses that happened elsewhere in the subtitles. Thus, when certain words are somewhat emphasized in the source text, they are occasionally capitalized in the subtitles, as in the following Example (6), where Claude's frustration and use of swearwords have been rendered with the use of words in capital letters:

Example 6.

Original dialogue (21:11–21:31, Reel 1, p.5)	English back translation
Claude: Putain, qu'est-ce que j'ai, merde ? Je ne sais pas ce que j'ai. J'ai pas mal à rien. Je dis... J'ai envie de faire quelque chose, bon dieu ! Faire quelque chose, merde !	Claude: Fuck, what's happening to me, shit? I don't know what's wrong with me. Nothing hurts. I mean... I feel like doing something, my god! Do something, shit!
<b>English subtitles</b>	
I want to DO something.	
I want to FEEL something.	

Another eloquent example of Cohen's creative impulse can be observed in his decision to deal with the translation of some exchanges happening at the beginning of the film. Claude confesses in front of the camera that he hates parties and, yet, reluctantly, ends up attending the party where he will eventually meet Johanne. As soon as he arrives, he bumps into Barbara, one of the hosts of the social event, and a tirade ensues in which she jokingly accuses him of not being a good friend, as displayed in Figure 9.

The scene goes on for some 20 seconds (04:39–04:59), and only two short subtitles appear on screen, disregarding the content of what is presumably consid-

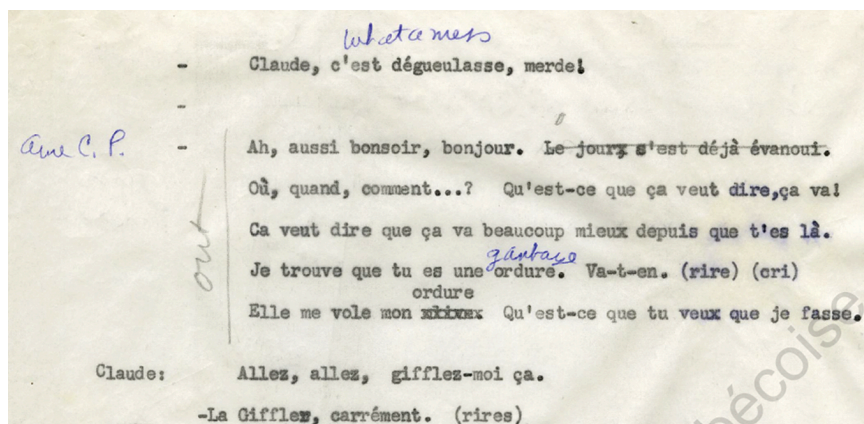


Figure 9. Reel 1, p.3 (04:39 – 04:59). 1984.0049.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

ered to be a trivial exchange, not worthy of a literal transfer into English. The light-hearted solutions activated by the subtitler are recorded in Figures 10 and 11:



Figure 10. (04:39–04:50). Courtesy of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

This very pragmatic rendering points towards the idea that most of the translation choices were not embedded in an overarching recontextualization strategy but were the result of a quick and ad hoc decision process for which reduction and deletion seemed the easiest solutions. Next to that, Cohen's artistic stature and thematic familiarity with the project seem to have given him carte blanche with the translation, which resulted in some remarkable choices. For instance, in one of the first scenes, Claude says to himself in a voice-off: *c'est comme dans la chanson de Victor* [it's like in Victor's song], whereupon he begins to chant the song in



Figure 11. (04:52–05:59). Courtesy of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

question. In the English version, the reference to Victor has completely disappeared, and Claude begins to sing a poem written by Cohen himself (“As the mist leaves no scar”) to an improvised melody. This approach is markedly different from the one adopted to deal with the rest of the songs, which, as discussed in the case of the Creole “Choucounne,” consists in leaving them untranslated. Towards the end of the film, we see a similar oblique reference to the poem by Cohen. After Claude has ended his relationship with Johanne, she writes to him to tell him that *tu n’as laissé aucune trace* (you haven’t left any trace). Cohen creatively translates it as “Your body left no scars on me,” a reference to the abovementioned poem,<sup>4</sup> which begins as follows:

As the mist leaves no scar  
 On the dark green hill,  
 So my body leaves no scar  
 On you, nor ever will.

The choice of the “scar” metaphor, absent in the French original, is not accidental and is actually reinforced by the repetition of the same lexical item in the sentence immediately after this one and also in the crucial passage where Johanne asks Claude if he likes boys. A solution that departs so much from the original and introduces nuances that are not present in the original is not fully representative of Cohen’s general translation strategy. However, it shows the extent to which his behavior can be seen to have involved a dimension of “co-writing” or, in the words of Lefevere (1985), “rewriting,” undoubtedly based on his own literary work.

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4. The poem was originally published in *The Spice-Box of Earth* (1961) and then printed as an epigraph in *The Favourite Game* (1963), precisely because the word “scar” is a key concept in Cohen’s first novel.



Part of this rewriting can also be observed in the way in which some of the personal narratives projected in the original film have been manipulated in such a manner that the English text alters the characterization of the protagonists. This is particularly evident in the case of Johanne, when she speaks in the first person. Asked by Claude about her relationship with her husband (26:04–26:08), she acknowledges that *il sait qu'il se passe quelque chose. Je ne suis plus la même avec lui. Il s'en rend compte* [he knows that something is going on. I am not the same with him anymore. He realizes something is on]. Her admission of guilt by forefronting her active role in the changes taking place in her emotional life gets defused in the subtitles, which subtly revert the roles in the relationship and lend the active part to her husband. As a result, she ends up in a secondary, passive position:

He senses something.

He's not the same with me.

A similar shift of focus can be found in Example (7). During a night out at a club, Johanne voices her desire to spend the whole night dancing and asks Claude whether he would join her. The subtitles, yet again, project the image of Johanne as a dependent female that needs to request permission from her male partner to fulfill her yearning:

Example 7.

Original dialogue (30:27–30:31)	English back translation
<b>Johanne:</b> Je veux danser toute la nuit. Tu veux ?	<b>Johanne:</b> I want to dance all night. Do you want to?
<b>Claude:</b> D'accord.	<b>Claude:</b> OK.
English subtitles	
I want to dance all night...	
May I?	
All right.	

Changes of this nature contribute to diluting her persona and recontextualizing her as a less fisty and independent woman on the verbal front.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that the translation of *À tout prendre* is the result of an interplay of factors: the overuse of reduction despite the absence of spatio-temporal limitations, Cohen's restricted translation experience combined with his influential profile as an artist, and the assumed intended target audience.

The fact that the dialogue exchanges were not scripted and left to actors' improvisation, together with the poor quality of the sound, which was recorded live, have taken their toll on the translation. The shortcomings on the technical dimension are the ones that first come to the fore, particularly the poor line breaks and synchronization between dialogue and written subtitles. In terms of content, reduction is the main strategy applied by Cohen in the form of both condensation and deletion, despite, as the archive documents show, his thorough understanding of the source text on the denotative and connotative levels. Deletion allows utterances to be heard in the soundtrack with no counterpart subtitle, which has a disorienting effect on the viewer, while the levels of condensation could be understood as being typical of the period. On the whole, the subs are an ancillary device that provides a minimalist representation of the original dialogue. On a positive note, they help to enhance understanding of the French exchanges, which on numerous occasions can be disjointed and jumbled up. These radical interventions can be attributed to the celebrity stature of the translator, who was involved in the film's production from the outset. Emphasis seems to have been placed on the formal presentation of the subtitles as shown in the documents drafted by Laboratoires Titra, a leading language service provider in the film industry still in operation, in which they are happy to advise on the length of the subtitles but not on the actual content, translated by such a reputed artist as Cohen.

When it comes to the linguistic transfer itself, no misunderstandings have been encountered, although the translation can be said to differ from the original on a substantial number of points, which, on occasions, depart from the creative intent of the original, as in the case of the diluted characterization of Johanne, which comes across as much feistier and more liberated in the original French than in the English version. Many intertextual references, whether literary or cinematographic (e.g., *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, *Jules et Jim*), have been erased in the English copy, perhaps because of the image that Cohen may have had of the potential target audience: an educated and intellectual one that could understand some of those references directly from the original, as they are visible on screen. The end result is a less rich network of interrelationships in the English version, which requires a greater cognitive effort from the target viewers to fill in the missing gaps in the plot – the above-mentioned “things” that are lost in the translation. In this sense, it can be argued that the subtitles have not helped much in the film's

internationalization journey. Regarding the non-linguistic elements, music plays an important role in *À tout prendre*. In general, musical fragments are left untranslated, but on one occasion, the (French) “chanson de Victor” has been replaced by another song based upon a poem written by Cohen himself. This change is not part of a broader translation strategy to adapt the movie to a new context; we consider this as nothing more than a playful nod from the translator.

In a survey article, Ramos Pinto and Adami (2020, 20; our translation) argue that “the semiotic resources outside of language have not led to a national codification of equal magnitude. Nation-states have not made the same effort to codify gestures, music or cinematic conventions as they have to codify the written word.” However, it is true that for *À tout prendre* – and perhaps for many other films – the contextual frame of reference is not primarily the nation-state. Socially speaking, the main frame of reference is that of the Quebec region, both in terms of the production process and the final product. Artistically, the film is situated within the Francophone and, at the time, the internationally growing artistic context of the Nouvelle Vague. Given these sociocultural parameters, it seems legitimate to postulate that the social profile of the English-speaking viewers must have been similar to the profile of the original audience: an educated and intellectual audience, interested in art cinema, who could understand some of those references directly from the original or were happy to leave their comfort zone and be challenged by a different language and culture.

As indicated in the opening credits of the film, “The digitization and restoration of this film remain faithful to the body and spirit of the original work,” it is evident that the initiative carried out by the *Cinémathèque québécoise* considered both the film as well as the subtitles as the “original work,” and hence the decision to leave the latter intact despite their shortcomings. Once again, the prominence of the translator can be adduced as the drive behind this decision rather than the subtitles’ translational qualities. Yet, the jury is out as to whether a new set of subtitles would do better justice to the intricate scaffolding of details that populate the film and will help to recontextualize them in a manner that could bring the film and its message closer to contemporary audiences.

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## Appendix 1. 1984.0049.05.SC. Collection of the *Cinémathèque québécoise*

no			description of content	dialogue	commentary	music
124	566'0	L.S.	front of building, Johanne looks at herself in window, go in.	<u>Johanne:</u> I'll be right back.	<u>Claude:</u> So that's where she lives.. Her world behind this wall...	—
125	530'19	M.C.S.	Claude whistles.	—	—	—
126	513'6	M.C.S.	Claude rubs his eyes.	<u>Claude:</u> What's happening to me now?	—	—
127	520'19	M.L.S. to L.S.	Claude marche dans la rue, comes back, sings, jumps.	J	<u>Claude:</u> Don't worry. If you like her you keep her. And if you don't well, that's the way it goes.	Claude sings: As the mist & leaves noscar on the bank..
128	545'30		Johanne joins Claude, they kiss.	<u>Claude:</u> Bonjour. Ça va? <u>Johanne:</u> Merçi.	—	—
129	555'4	C.U.	oumura.	—	<u>Claude:</u> For the sake of art, we're going to take pictures, capturing moments of a glorious filming trip. Tropics are the sweetest part .....	—
130	558'28	M.S. to M.L.S. (RS)	Johanne walks, Claude takes pictures.	—	<u>Claude:</u> .... of love.	Tha-Tha.
131	566	M.S.	Claude takes picture.	—	—	"
	566'30	M.S.	Johanne waves a scarf	—	—	"

## Appendix 2. 1984.0049.06.SC.Collection of the Cinémathèque québécoise

Kull

- 6 -

voix ~~fem~~: Non, écoute, moi moi je connais quelqu'un là...

Johanne: Ecoute, ce sera pas *difficile* amour, écoute-moi, ...  
Je te dis ça simplement parce que je ~~ix~~ <sup>me</sup> sais ni malheureuse  
heureuse  
trop ? mais ni trop peureuse, tu comprends?

Claude: Trop heureuse, un jeu de mot!... (*intranslatable pun*)

Johanne: Non non non. Éliminons la liaison.

Claude: La nôtre, elle est trop dangereuse?....

Johanne: Non cher, compromettante, vous voulez dire....

(MUSIQUE)

*JF* Claude: Depuis l'explosion de la nouvelle, son corps est l'objet de  
soins jaloux. *payé par ailleurs*  
On le chole, on le vénère comme le lieu sacré où  
mûrit le fruit de nos destinées. Pendant de longues soirées tranquilles  
*Mus des 1884 jour destiny*  
je dessine ~~xxx~~ *xxx* corps, sources de nos joies convulsives mais qui  
*leur body*  
aujourd'hui fait de nous non plus des amants mais un couple. (*permanent*)

*dialogue* Claude: Je fais un double portrait. *notos must-loves*  
Tu aimes tous les portraits?  
*un double portrait? Je crois que j'en sais ce que*  
Johanne: J'aime tous les portraits. Tu veux que je te dise ~~par~~ que tu veux  
dire.  
Tu vois? Tu crois?  
*et cho botton j les likes*

*JF* Claude: Un coin chaud et turbulent au creux de son ventre polarise nos  
préoccupations. *meur* J'enregistre par imagination l'évolution de cet  
élément étranger que par aveuglement paternel ~~je~~ <sup>déjà</sup> je considère comme  
une simple transplantation de moi-même.

(MUSIQUE - bruits d'automobiles)

?? attention

Johanne: Tu veux m'écouter deux secondes

Claude: Oum oum!

Johanne: Hier, j'ai rencontré Nicholas

Claude: Qui est Nicholas?....

Johanne: C'est un garçon que j'ai connu et qui m'a beaucoup aimé.  
D'ailleurs je crois qu'il m'aime encore. Alors je lui ai parlé  
de notre problème et il aimerait que tu le rencontres pour te donner  
des conseils.

Claude: Des conseils!...

Johanne: Tu veux?....

## Résumé

Notre contribution examine la relation entre texte et contexte dans les pratiques de traduction multimodale, en se focalisant sur le film québécois *À tout prendre* (1963, réalisé par Claude Jutra) et sa version anglaise *Take It All* (traduite par Leonard Cohen). Dans les deux premières sections, on trouve les informations contextuelles tandis que la section trois propose une analyse comparée, dans laquelle le rôle central revient au film lui-même et aux archives, comme les brouillons du script en français et de la traduction anglaise. Dans l'ensemble, *Take It All* résulte d'une combinaison de facteurs, à savoir une utilisation excessive de la réduction (condensation et omission) malgré l'absence de limitations spatiales ou temporelles, l'expérience limitée en traduction de L. Cohen, combinée à sa renommée comme artiste, et le public visé. Les sous-titres servent plutôt d'appoint, offrant une représentation minimale du dialogue original. À propos du transfert linguistique lui-même, on n'a guère noté de malentendus, même si la traduction diverge de l'original dans de nombreux aspects. En conséquence, la version anglaise montre un réseau moins dense de relations. On peut donc arguer que les sous-titres n'ont guère contribué de manière significative à la circulation internationale du film.

**Mots clés :** multimodalité, traduction audiovisuelle, sous-titrage, Leonard Cohen, Claude Jutra

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