

- ARTICLE -

The Dub Encounter in New Zealand Film

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Abstract

Peter Wells takes 'dubbing' as a metaphor to describe the cultural and cinematic experience of projecting 'our thoughts, desires and dreams ... into other peoples' accents' (2005, 25). Only when 'the element of dubbing is removed from our speech on film' will New Zealand cinema find its own voice. I use the idea of dubbing to advance a theoretical reading of New Zealand film that undoes the binary between local and global. I explore this *unheimlich* quality in reference to the films of John O'Shea, Barry Barclay and Florian Habicht. I examine the rupture that these directors introduce between voice and image in order to discover a poetics of identity that is attuned to a disjunct experience of place, time and history beyond the limits of national cinema.

Peter Wells tells the story of his first rapturous encounter with the 'mystery of cinema' in *On Going to the Movies*, a personal essay on the growing pains of New Zealand film and its tentative attempts to find a voice of its own (2005, 39). As a young boy growing up in New Zealand in the 1950s, he would sit in the kitchen for hours looking through a 'cheap plastic viewer' at stills from Hollywood movies or Queen Elizabeth's Coronation, immersed in the visual spectacle, inventing scenes and stories that would complete the missing picture. But the magic of those moments is enhanced rather than diminished in Wells' memory by the gap between reality and desire. Beyond the image of the newly crowned Queen or of a seductive femme fatale, he could always sense, off screen and slightly out of focus, the backdrop of his own mundane surroundings. As soon as he glanced away or turned aside,

[t]he familiar world of our family kitchen rushed in to colonise the field of my eye – the checked lino in black and white and scarlet, the egg-yolk yellow walls, the grey painted cupboards. But the strange thing was they all appeared momentarily as unreal as what I had just been looking at. Or,

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alternatively, they formed themselves into a visual narrative I suddenly apprehended: an order underlay what I normally saw as a jumble of chaos. I was discovering or rediscovering the essential strangeness of the familiar. (Wells 2005, 38-39)

Wells describes this perceptual/conceptual shift as an experience of vertigo. The homely décor of a typical kiwi kitchen suddenly feels *unheimlich*. Something uncanny emerges in the encounter between the mundane and the mysterious. The foreign inhabits the familiar. The ordinary appears exotic. But the budding young filmmaker has intuitively grasped the principle of montage, the strange relationship of distance and proximity established in the momentary alignment of two apparently unrelated images.

Wells' account of his formative experience of the mystery of cinema conveys the ghostly potential of the medium to provoke disturbing effects and unexpected associations. The conjunction of disparate objects within the same frame of reference was a staple feature of modernist art and criticism. Cinema, the popular art-form of the twentieth century, utilises the technique of juxtaposition – the basic property of the medium to connect images into a coherent sequence whilst respecting their dissimilarity – to order and arrange visual information. Montage achieves a meaningful representation of reality through the surprising and unfamiliar combination of images or ideas. By following Wells' lead, I hope to extend the concept and practice of montage toward a reflection upon the more troubling relation between voice and image in the work of a handful of New Zealand filmmakers (John O'Shea, Barry Barclay and Florian Habicht). I will call this unexpected liaison 'the dub encounter'.

Dub Encounter 1: Peter Wells

Later in his essay, Wells refers to an effect that resembles his experience in the family kitchen but, this time, with a significant change in emphasis. He switches registers from image to sound, equating the purely visual phenomenon of montage with the acoustic practice of dubbing. Wells expresses his frustration throughout *On Going to the Movies* that for 'every New Zealander of a certain age' cinema was essentially a foreign and, therefore, an alienating experience. The flicks, in a manner of speaking, were 'dubbed':

Like people in some kind of strange world who did not yet possess a language, we experienced a kind of eternal dubbing whereby all our thoughts, desires and dreams had to be changed into other people's accents, and to be represented through other people's landscapes, cities, houses, food, sayings. (Wells 2005, 25)

An uncomfortable feeling of cognitive dissonance is produced in the viewer, compounded by distance and delay from the wondrous source of the images on screen. The New Zealand audience of the day is bound to look elsewhere. Wells goes on to compare this state, in words that recall his earlier discovery of montage, to a 'strange sense of overlapping, like two images swimming one on top of the other imprecisely'

(Wells 2005, 46-47). This time, however, the unexpected connection takes on a negative meaning. 'Dubbing' serves as a displaced metaphor for an unusual disturbance in the field of vision. By implication, it stands for all that is defective and derivative, dubious and deceptive. 'The element of dubbing', Wells ultimately concludes, disregarding his childhood epiphany at the kitchen table, should be removed 'from our speech on film' (2005, 46).

Dubbing, as it is commonly understood, consists of rerecording the dialogue of a film in a different language, in effect replicating the words of the original actors in the voice of another.¹ Dubbing creates an obvious discrepancy between voice and image, often with unintended comic or creepy results. The mouths of the actors move but the words are no longer in sync. Wells emphasises 'those slight delays, when the actor's lips form, flute, contort or relax, yet the sound rides out on its own defiant trajectory' (2005, 24). Others have reacted more violently to 'the torments of dubbing' (Yampolsky 1993, 57). Antonin Artaud, for example, describes with horror 'the heavy mouth of Marlene Dietrich, the pulpy and hard mouth of Joan Crawford or the equine mouth of Greta Garbo' (Yampolsky 1993, 60) condemned by the processes of mechanical reproduction to consume the alien voice of an anonymous foreign actress. By the same token, in an act of vocal cannibalism, the film star divests the invisible speaker of her living body.

Mikhail Yampolsky has described dubbing as 'the intrusion of foreign acoustical matter into the body' (1993, 62). His examples reveal the psychic effects of such an alien invasion. Artaud allegedly wrote a screenplay called the *Dybbuk*, based upon a figure from Jewish folklore: a dead soul that inhabits the body of a living person and whose voice speaks through their mouth, causing them to curse, rave and moan. Senatpräsident Schreber, the subject of one of Freud's famous case histories, was also assaulted by 'voices and souls dwelling within his body and attempting to subjugate him to their will' (Yampolsky 1993, 62). He was forced to speak as if his mouth, in Yampolsky's words, was 'cinematically dubbed' (1993, 62). Wells has identified a more benign but no less insidious form of possession at the level of cultural identity. Speaking and seeing are strangely conflated in his account of going to the movies. As a young film buff growing up in New Zealand, he too suffers the eternal torments of 'dubbing', if only in the form of an occasional adolescent spasm. The events, objects and actors on screen are a displaced projection of his own existential state – 'undefined, unformed, inchoate' – unless externalised in the guise of images from Hollywood (Wells 2005, 25). If the unconscious speaks in the language of film, it addresses us in an American accent.

Wells' autobiographical tale about going to the movies follows the pattern of a familiar argument about New Zealand film. Its claims rest upon a keenly felt awareness of dislocation and disorientation. 'Cinema has always had peculiar power over New Zealanders', he states, 'partly because every one of us, regardless of race, is unavoidably shaped by distance' (2005, 8). Wells never returns to the question of race, nor does he consider the specific relation that Māori or Pākehā might hold toward the 'peculiar power' of the cinematic image, let alone toward each other. Instead, he continues to

rehearse some of the accepted ideas about the formation and function of national cinema. In effect, despite its fierce resistance to the parochial attitudes and provincial ideals that governed cultural expression in New Zealand film from the 1930s to the early 1980s, *On Going to the Movies* does not depart significantly from the premises about national identity that inform Sam Neill and Judy Rymer's *Cinema of Unease* (1995). Both cast New Zealand's assumption of political, cultural and cinematic independence as a coming-of-age story. We do not possess an image or an identity of our own. Film is a mirror, an acoustic mirror, as Wells contends so suggestively. A national cinema develops when people recognise their own faces on screen, when they express their own stories in their own voices. Wells asserts that we speak in a borrowed language. New Zealand will acquire a film culture of its own when it ceases to imitate images from elsewhere, when it projects its own dreams and memories rather than consumes a diet of films from Great Britain or Hollywood. The peculiar power which cinema holds over its New Zealand audience is the product, therefore, of a colonialist regime of representation.

Wells, however, has introduced a potentially disruptive element into the mix: let's call it 'the dub encounter', after the ghost effect produced when two seemingly unrelated experiences or events occupy the same frame of reference. Wells' childhood initiation into 'the mystery of cinema' maintains the spooky circuit of exchange that connects the real and the imaginary. Since that day, he remains highly ambivalent about the authority and authenticity of the image. From the 'disconnected fragments' of film that he would gaze at through the plastic viewer, he'd glimpse 'another drama' (Wells 2005, 38). But it could vanish in the blink of an eye and be eclipsed by the dreary scenery of the family kitchen. As this primal scene reveals, a rare pleasure is to be found in the play of discontinuity and displacement. Wells conceives of cinema as an enchanted space that resists the drive toward completion and closure. A film is a partial object; it cannot be grasped in its totality, only in passing or in fleeting moments, only in the coincidence of a fugitive encounter. At the same time, however, he desperately feels the need to eliminate the tyranny of distance that has defined New Zealand film. The latter must be reduced in order to project a recognisable image of this place and people on screen. Yet Wells has already happily embraced the strangeness which lies at the heart of the familiar, the uncanny presence of the Other that resides close to home. If 'every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere – and not simply in terms of language' (Egoyan and Balfour 2004, 1), the idea of dubbing suggests that New Zealand film is already foreign to itself. It will always be double. The dub encounter, therefore, opens the possibility for a reading of New Zealand film that is attuned to the uncertainties of reference and representation. It remains alert to the vagaries and ambiguities of expression that unsettle the secure notions of identity and belonging that maintain the claims of cultural nationalism that have defined New Zealand cinema over the years. I will explore this *unheimlich* quality in reference to the early features of John O'Shea, the first episode of *Tangata Whenua*, the ground-breaking television documentary by Barry Barclay and Michael King, and *Woodenhead*, Florian Habicht's

first feature film. To some extent, all of these films undo the binary between the foreign and familiar that Wells perceives at the heart of a certain tendency in New Zealand film.

For the purposes of this essay, dub is not reduced solely to a technical cinematic procedure; rather, technical solutions, as I hope to show in the following examples, often result in the creative invention of new methods or models for critical research. Dub, here, acts as a kind of homophonic echo chamber, a conceptual pun in which several layers of meaning overlap. It permits us to trace the itinerary of a theoretical figure: from the strange vacillation between the familiar and the unfamiliar to the metonymic association of voice and image. Wells compares the pernicious ‘element of dubbing’ in our ‘speech on film’ to ‘two images swimming one on top of the other imprecisely’ (Wells 2005, 47). Artaud connects ‘the torments of dubbing’ with the *dybbuk* and, hence, to the ‘thoroughly ghoulish’ presence of the double. We need only add, as the final term in the series, the sonic vibrations of dub music.² Lee Scratch Perry, the mad genius of reggae to whom many credit the invention of dub, describes the eerie sound effects and eccentric rhythms he produces in the studio as ‘the ghosts in me coming out’ (Corbett 1994, 20). ‘In fact’, as John Corbett confirms, ‘in a Jamaican context the word *dub* has etymological connection with “dup” or “dupe”, patois for ghost. Dub is about doubles, the *doppelgänger*’ (Corbett 1994, 20). The dub encounter, then, takes place at the point where two distinctly different experiences of time, image or identity intersect.

Dub Encounter 2: John O’Shea

The unresolved tension at the basis of Wells’ attitude to New Zealand film may account for his damning appraisal of John O’Shea:

The films of John O’Shea aroused in me an uncomfortable itch. Later I would recognise it as the special clamminess which goes with the cringe of recognising the crumminess of local film. It’s like the humiliation of wearing something homemade to a party when you are a teenager. (Wells 2005, 34)

Wells’ embarrassed reaction to the ‘homemade’ quality of O’Shea’s early feature films conceals a deeper anxiety about the ‘element of dubbing’ that characterises New Zealand cinema. This is all the more ironic in that O’Shea has been one of the few local filmmakers to openly acknowledge, as Wells does in *On Going to the Movies*, that sense of the uncanny, ‘the strangeness of our life and times here and the way that what was lurking in the background of our history was strange and contradictory, mysterious and enigmatic – in fact surrealist’ (O’Shea 1999, 30). O’Shea sees an affinity between the ‘ambiguous arrangements of recognisable forms’ in surrealist photography and painting, and a striking propensity within New Zealand film, most notably in the work of Vincent Ward and Jane Campion, for the juxtaposition of incongruous objects and images, for the staging of unusual scenes in familiar settings (and vice versa). O’Shea

finds an approximate expression of this condition of estrangement in 'the three limp watches' of Salvador Dalí's painting *The Persistence of Memory*:

One thing we know about them is they won't be much good for telling the time. As in New Zealand you never really know what the time is ... or, if you do, it might be twisted out of shape -- and the artist's reference to the watches as a limp camembert of time and space makes the painting rather relevant to film, in which we manipulate time and space. (1999, 29)

'Personally', O'Shea freely admits, 'I delight in the camembert frolics of New Zealand filmmaking' (1999, 29).

'The uncomfortable itch' that Wells felt may have more to do with the temporal and spatial deformation that O'Shea accepts as a necessary feature of New Zealand filmmaking. Whether by accident or design, O'Shea often foregrounds the element of distortion or 'dubbing', as we would have it, in his early films. In *Broken Barrier* (1952), a tale of interracial romance, poverty of means was turned to creative advantage; the lack of synchronised sound resulted in the expressive technique of interior monologue. The main characters delivered their lines as 'spoken thoughts', a device that certainly produces an alienating effect but which also exposes the gulf between social convention and the freedom to live and love as one chooses in 1950s New Zealand. O'Shea further refines this method in a memorable scene from *Runaway* (1964), indicating, at the very least, that he seeks to reveal the duplicitous structure of identity and that he is fully aware of the conceptual and (in this case) technical attributes of the dub encounter.

David Manning (Colin Broadley) – young, handsome, privileged and white; bored with the suburbs, offices and nightclubs of Auckland – leaves the big city behind and hitchhikes north. Suitcase in hand, he trudges along a shingle road. From the crest of a hill, he surveys the headland of Hokianga Harbour with its distinctive sand dunes and beaches. A flash American Cadillac with a glamorous woman at the wheel rounds the bend and pulls over: 'Going far?' she asks. David accepts the ride. The car slowly descends the winding road, as Laura (Nadja Regin) delivers a contemptuous monologue about the harbour – 'wide, flat, empty' – the mudflats and sandhills, 'the shabby little houses', and 'those stupid Māoris who burnt the forest off centuries ago'. O'Shea refuses to structure the scene in shot/reverse shot, the most basic unit of film technique since the advent of sound; as a result, we never see Laura speak. Her speech has been stifled at its source and replaced by a recorded voiceover. Soundtrack, image and voice are at variance. The fictional space of the film is presented in an oddly objective manner. The Hokianga is filmed as an alien landscape, the desolate location for an Antonioni movie. The camera maintains a disturbing distance from character and landscape. The sequence is shot from a number of different angles – above, behind, in profile. Point of view shifts from close-up to wide-shot, from portrait to panorama. Laura's speech – 'It's not much of a place, the Hokianga' – functions more like the voice-over commentary from a sinister documentary than as a dramatic expression of her character's own

subjective viewpoint. Her thoughts and feelings are treated with a dispassionate scrutiny, viewed from the outside, one could almost say. It is as if her words originated from an extradiegetic source. They seem to float above the scene rather than be grounded within the narrative, dried up and drained of meaning and affect, just like the barren landscape she describes. Her tone, already quite impersonal and detached, draws attention to the gap between what she's saying and what we are shown. Nadja Regin's thick European accent further exacerbates the obvious distance between voice and image. She was only in New Zealand for a short time so her lines, while recorded during the shoot, were dubbed later in the studio by an Auckland actress. While this explains the stilted nature of her character's speech, the technical limitations of the scene play an instrumental role in producing such an uncanny aesthetic effect. Dubbing, in practice and in theory, as cinematic technique and conceptual method, does not simply complicate the division between sound and image. It inverts the customary distinction between artifice and identity, character and performance, interiority and exteriority, narrative fiction and visual record, while compounding the distance and the difference which separates them.

Dub Encounter 3: Barry Barclay

Barry Barclay adopts a related strategy in the first episode of *Tangata Whenua* (1974), 'The Spirit and the Times Will Teach'. Barclay worked with O'Shea at Pacific Pictures where he was schooled in the documentary tradition of John Grierson. He makes a strong case in *Our Own Image*, arguably the best book ever written on filmmaking in Aotearoa New Zealand, that the fact-based, agenda-driven, topic-oriented model of documentary imported from Great Britain did not always translate well to the local context, especially in the Māori community. Exposition, explanation, evidence, information, objectivity, concision and clarity are the defining features of the dominant form of documentary. In terms of logical method and linear argument, they reflect a Pākehā mentality of analysis and enquiry. Barclay, on the other hand, celebrates the circular or cyclic pattern of Māori conversation, its stories and speeches, its protocols and rituals, its importance as a form of communal expression and intimate exchange. He likens the process of documentary filmmaking to calling a *hui*, a gathering of the people to discuss an issue of great significance. One must learn how to be a listener and how to appreciate and respect the value of *kōrero*, one must understand the nature and meaning of 'talk' in the Māori world, if one is to take the camera onto the marae or 'into places only Māori go' (Barclay 1990, 14). This requires a different approach and attitude to filming, one which dispenses with many of the conventional practices of shooting or scripting a documentary. In *Tangata Whenua*, Barclay, alongside his co-director Michael King, developed a set of techniques that reversed the privileged relationship of image over sound. He foregrounds the place and position of speech and highlights the central role of the voice.

Barclay recounts the story of a BBC film crew who wished to interview Ngoi Pewhairangi, the great Māori leader, teacher and composer of *waiata*. Ngoi wanted to be

filmed with her friends while she talked, but the director refused. The default setting for the television interview is the ‘talking head’ format: an expert or witness speaks on camera and communicates their message directly to an imagined audience. Cultural and ideological conventions determine this mode of address as much as the codes of documentary filmmaking. Barclay fears that the talking head turns real people ‘into puppets with moving lips’. Their speech, just like the dubbed actor’s, is depersonalised and mechanical: ‘there is no sense of a human talking intimately to other humans, only an image of somebody turned into a mouthpiece for the purpose of the linear argument’ (1990, 15). This process, as Barclay recognises, is not the Māori way and will never be conducive to recording the dreams, memories and stories of his people.

In order to do so, it is necessary to limit the invasive presence of the crew and the camera. Filmmaking is an intrusive business and professional filmmakers, as the previous anecdote shows, can be a culturally insensitive bunch. Most of the ‘interviews’ in *Tangata Whenua* are shot from a distance and recorded on location, a small crew tucked away out of sight and the camera ready to roll at a sign from the director. This means that ‘the important talk does not have to start right away. The subjects can then chat about whatever they like’ (1990, 17). Barclay places greater priority upon how to effectively record sound than upon how to capture the best images when it comes to filming in a Māori context. For technical and symbolic reasons, he dispenses with the standard practice of ‘slating’ at the beginning of a ‘take’. He describes it as ‘a pretty violent affair’ and compares it implicitly to the assertive nature of Pākehā debate and discussion where one must push one’s views forward and ‘[go] one better’ (Barclay 1990, 14). On the marae, it is necessary to sit back and listen and speak when the time comes just as it is preferable to ‘end slate’, to synchronise the rushes from the end of the roll, if one is to respect one’s subjects and film them with dignity.

Tanagata Whenua opens with a conversation between Nga Kahikatea Wirihana, ‘the oldest member of the Waikato tribes’, and Te Uira Manihera. Barclay immediately breaks with the accepted method of filming an interview and, in a significant departure from the standard mode of address in documentary film, reassigned the role of ‘spokesperson’ across several distinct voices. The entire sequence, which serves as a poetic invocation for the first episode of the series, the cinematic equivalent of a *karakia* perhaps, establishes a shifting network of relations between Māori and English, speaking and listening, storytelling and narration, *kōrero* and song. The voices of the ancestors are evoked in the interplay between the various speakers and in the relative function of their discursive role within the scene: narrator, storyteller (the *kuia*), leader of the chorus (the *kaumātua*). The ghosts of the past emerge, are almost tangibly present, in the space opened between what is seen, spoken and heard. The camera, in Barclay’s insightful phrase, must take on the role of a listener.

The first sound heard, in fact, is a chorus of birdsong. They twitter away in the background as the narrator, in a tone at once prosaic and lyrical, introduces the scene and the first images appear – fields in the early morning mist, fences, trees, gateposts.

Seamlessly, he assumes the role of translator and interpreter as the old *kuia*, framed in a doorway and seated next to Te Uira, who acts as listener, prompt and active partner in the conversation, tells the story of Taipu. The camera holds the two in a tight medium shot as Nga Kahikatea laments that she forgets things easily now and that her memory is failing her. Te Uira, gesturing toward the hills off-screen, reassures her that there is a reason why she has stayed behind as an elder. He begins a *waiata* and, as the old woman joins in in a faltering voice, the camera slowly zooms in on her wrinkled weather-beaten face and holds her in close-up. Her *moko* is visible, the living embodiment of her connection to the ancestors, her *tupuna*. They chant in unison as the narrator, in fine counterpoint, translates the words into English:

This pain within me
longing for these loved ones of mine
will never cease.
Here I dream of them, speak to them, embrace them
and awake to find nothing
but the rustling and whispering of the breeze.
If only they were in a distant land
I could at least visit them
but, alas, my loved ones
the ties that bind us now are torn by death.

The language switches freely between *te reo* and English, alternating between voice-over narration and filmed dialogue. The strict division between diegetic and extradiegetic speech does not preclude a mutual exchange between Pākehā and Māori ways of seeing and knowing. Neither subtitling nor dubbing is required to facilitate the encounter that Barclay initiates between *tikanga Māori* and the Anglophone tradition of documentary realism. For a New Zealand audience of the time, these images, as Barclay wryly observes, could have come from Peru. The scene is infused with ‘dread’, in the rasta sense of the word, an awesome sense of *mana* and spiritual power: Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry has described dub as ‘the ghosts in me coming out’ (Corbett 1994, 20).

Dub Encounter 4: Florian Habicht

Florian Habicht has pushed the cinematic limits of the dub encounter to their radical conclusion further than most filmmakers in New Zealand. Dubbing is usually completed, if at all, during the post-production process, but the sound, music and dialogue of *Woodenhead*, Habicht’s first feature, were pre-recorded entirely before shooting began. The soundtrack must first work as a story, Habicht felt, before *Woodenhead* could exist as a film. The idea for this extraordinary reversal of accepted filmmaking practice, as recorded in a featurette about the making of the film, came to him in a dream that he recounts in the middle of Carlaw Park, the old rugby league ground at the foot of Parnell Rise:

I was alone here where I am now. In the middle of the night ... the lights were all lit really bright, the stadium lights, and I think I was pretty much almost spotlit, and it was raining really hard. From the distance, two angels approached and they came closer and I realised that they were Rastafarian angels. They came from over those hills and they pretty much landed right here between the two lights. So they were lit as well ... this used to be all grass. The angels landed right in front of me and I looked them right in the eyes and it was Milli Vanilli, the 80s pop duo. The first thing they said was 'Florian, we have a confession to make. We did not sing our songs on all the albums'. I already knew that and I thought that was pretty cool. And the next thing they said they had a message for me: they said 'for your next film – which was *Woodenhead* – we would like you to prerecord the entire soundtrack. Pre-record all the voices, all the music and all the location sounds'. ... That dream began *Woodenhead*.

As absurd as Florian's story seems, the advent of the two Recording Angels, in the guise of disgraced popstars Milli Vanilli, heralds the triumph of 'dubbing' as conceptual method. *Woodenhead* reveals that the structural and stylistic unity of much narrative-based film is a pure illusion. In effect, *Woodenhead* has been made twice – once without images and once without sound, once in the studio, once on location, once in front of the microphone and once in front of the camera, once with actors and once without. As Henry Lee, one of the few performers who recorded his own voice for the film, remarks amusingly: 'I thought Steven was in the movie but his image wasn't there' (Habicht 2004). Steve Abel, who provides the voice of Gert, the male protagonist of the film, is absent yet present, invisible yet audible. His voice inhabits another body. His character, as played by Nicholas Butler, walks and talks like a ventriloquist's dummy possessed by the ghost of Buster Keaton. The characters in *Woodenhead* are a grotesque amalgam of corporeal (body) and incorporeal (voice) features. Florian, however, speaks of the practical benefits of choosing to work in this way: he can cast for the 'best voices' and the 'best faces' (Habicht 2004). As many of the actors were drawn from amongst his friends, the expressive qualities of their own physicality and personality determined the nature of their role as much as the ability to act. Habicht stages an encounter between the real person and their double.

The film too is fundamentally split and spliced, double in character but single in form. It possesses a chimerical unity just as dubbing creates an artificial identity between voice and image. The seam always shows, as Jorge Luis Borges notes in 'On Dubbing', one of his occasional pieces of film criticism. The mouth seems stitched to the actor's face, the voice 'screwed on' to the body (Yampolsky 1993, 72). Borges is far more cautious than Habicht in his interest in dubbing. He is disturbed by its inherent duplicity. For Borges, dubbing is essentially false: 'worse than dubbing or the substitution that dubbing implies, is one's general awareness of a substitution, of a fake' (Borges 2001, 263). But it fascinates precisely because, as a simulacrum, it 'does not refer to reality but to the

world of false representations' and, hence, in its imaginary splendour, resembles something monstrous:

The Greeks engendered the chimera, a monster with the head of a lion, the head of a dragon, and the head of a goat; the theologians of the second century, the Trinity, in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy ghost are inextricably linked; the Chinese zoologists, the *ti-yiang*, a bright red, supernatural bird equipped with six feet and six wings but with neither face nor eyes; the geometrists of the nineteenth century, the hypercube, a four dimensional figure that encloses an infinite number of cubes and is bounded by eight cubes and twenty-four squares. Hollywood has just enriched this frivolous, teratological museum: by means of a perverse artifice they call dubbing, they offer monsters that combine the well-known features of Greta Garbo with the voice of Aldonza Lorenza. (Borges 2001, 262)³

The Chimera is an 'an unstable and virtually inconceivable conglomerate of parts' (Yampolsky 1993, 70), which shares the same properties as dubbing and, by extension, sound film in general. Dubbing creates a 'verbal monster' in as much as it confuses the boundaries between presence and absence, inside and outside, original and copy. It effects an 'illusory division' between the audible and the visible while, paradoxically, collapsing the distinction between them. The voice issues from an externalised source, unlocatable and intangible, at once separate from and attached to its physical manifestation in the body of the movie star. Thus Greta Garbo becomes a fabulous beast who possesses, like the Trinity, a number of divine attributes in the one person.

Cinema, like the Church or the Circus, provides a haven for such aberrations. Borges' characterisation of dubbing as monstrous serves as a point of comparison for *Woodenhead's* sound design, as well as its visual style and branding. Teresa Peters' artwork for the DVD copy of the film depicts a menagerie of hybrid creatures: a dog with the head of a woman, dwarves, acrobats, cats in tutus. She also played Plum, the female protagonist of the film, and, as art director, was an important creative partner in achieving Florian's aesthetic vision. She describes *Woodenhead* as an attempt to blend 'a stylised, contrived reality with a raw and real one'. Her comments recall Peter Wells' initial experience of 'the essential strangeness of the familiar', as engendered by the dub encounter, while also offering an antidote to the allergic reaction – 'the uncomfortable itch' – he later felt when confronted with a home-grown version of New Zealand filmmaking. The 'element of dubbing' in New Zealand film does not signify an inferior or inauthentic relation to the cinematic image, as the examples provided by Wells, O'Shea, Barclay and Habicht show. The rupture that these directors introduce between voice and image implies a poetics of identity that is attuned to a disjunct experience of place, time and history beyond the narrowly defined limits of national cinema.

Notes

¹ Dubbing, nowadays, encompasses the entire post-production process and is employed for a variety of technical reasons, such as adding sound effects, improving audio quality, synchronising or rerecording dialogue. Abe Mark Nornes provides an interesting critical survey of the charms and quirks of dubbing in *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp. 188-228.

² Dub relies heavily on an inventive poetics of the mix. The studio becomes an instrument in its own right as the line blurs between performance (original) and recording (copy): songs rework previous versions, sounds are sampled and cut from other sources, tracks drop in and out, rhythms are fragmented and distorted by prolonged echo effects, reconstituted through ‘a lava haze of reverb’, as the music writer Lester Bangs declares.

³ Aldonza Lorenza, otherwise known as Dulcinea, is a character in *Don Quixote* who appears to the hero’s imagination in whatever fantastic form he desires.

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