**The Magic of Dubbing**

I'm told that you have to start a speech with a joke or a personal note. So here it is:

My family moved around a bit, but I spent my early childhood in Germany. When my sister was still very young, she noticed that sometimes, the lips of the people she saw on TV moved differently than her own lips, were she to say what they said. A little girl would talk to a green puppet frog and say, "Ich hab dich lieb". And it would look like this: "[I love you]". For some mysterious reason, although she said "lieb", her mouth would stay open. My sister thought that was a very special skill.

She was fascinated. It was like ventriloquism. She would try it out in front of a mirror to see if maybe she could learn to do that herself. She had not learned yet what people who grow up in a dubbing country simply accept: that lip movements and spoken words might not correspond. What people in other countries see as a problem simply isn't one for us. We feel no disconnect. Dubbing is something that we learn just like we learn to watch movies. And once my sister got it, she also got this: dubbing works. She watched TV and the characters on Sesame Street, or Bewitched, or The Munsters, they spoke to her. They entertained her, they made her laugh, they taught her the alphabet and how to count to ten, and everything they did was magic.

Dubbing works. It's part of our culture. It doesn't need to get fixed. But I believe that we are finding ourselves at a unique moment in the history of dubbing when technologies are being developed that can make dubbing better. I think. Because I know very little about them. That's why I'm so excited to be here because I want to learn something. And in exchange maybe I'll teach you something. "Show me yours and I'll show you mine".

Learning from one another always involves trust, and I have the privilege here to begin establishing that trust by showing you mine.

Dubbing works. Let me tell you a little about how it does, and when it doesn't, and why I love it.

Even though dubbing is a substantial part of the industry of localization, of making content available to people in all parts of the world in their native language, it's amazing how often I meet people, even in this business, who don't know what dubbing really is. Sometimes I take the easy way out, and I say, it's translating. I don't say that I write dubbing scripts, I say that I translate movies. Sometimes I get a little more sophisticated, and I use the standard – academic – definition of dubbing. We're "replacing the original dialogue track of a film with a track on which translated dialogues have been recorded in a target language."

But I really don't like to say it like that, because it sounds as if dubbing were doing some sort of violence to the original film, ripping out part of it and replacing it with something else. We might as well rip the USS Enterprise out of Star Trek and stick an airplane in it instead. Ridiculous. Although ...

The German nickname of Dr. McCoy is not the German word for "bones". It's the German word for "pill". Why, you might ask, are we not embarrassed by that, or apologize? It's because "Pille" is a stroke of genius, that's why.

The name has that playful, ever so slightly disrespectful ring, a tone that fits so perfectly to the tone that the good doctor himself assumes when he says "I'm a doctor, not a wordsmith". All of the things that the German word "Knochen" could never have achieved. So, "Pille" did in German what "Bones" did in English.

No one seemed to mind. For something like 80 years, the dubbers were left to their own devices. The proof of their work was in the revenues.

And then, dubbing into English came along. After many decades of leaving us to our own devices – sometimes to utterly frustrating extent, I'll come to some examples later – suddenly, someone in Hollywood looks up and says, "Wait! Hold on! I see now what we have to do to

bring foreign films into our market. These people that have been dubbing our films for years – translating our films into their languages – they are doing THAT? To US? They're CHANGING our films !?!"

Suspicious Hollywood should be, but not for the reasons they think. Dubbing into English may have turned on the spotlight, but films have been changed in the dub since dubbing existed. That you need to change the odd sentence around, swap one very specific cultural reference for another, or use a different joke to make a foreign audience laugh, are challenges of creating a lip sync version which should be obvious, but let's go back a few years.

The most notorious, and most researched motivation for making changes, is political. It's something that has become somewhat less prominent with the advent of streaming platforms, where the audience can easily switch between language versions, and make a comparison, but when the original soundtrack disappears in dubbing, it was once relatively easy to erase unwanted topics or emphasize others. The violence done to "Casablanca" or "Notorious," as postwar Germany was intent on erasing references to its Nazi past, has been extensively documented.

Changing the German Hans Gruber into an undefined European named Jack in "Die Hard" might actually have been motivated less by political considerations than by the difficulty of representing German as a foreign language in a film that's dubbed into German, but it was at the very least convenient that the bad guy became less German in the process.

Interestingly, I'm not aware of any resistance to these changes by the original producers – they seem not to have been involved. Very few screenwriters or directors were as interested in their dubs as Billy Wilder, who was in a unique position as a bilingual screenwriter and director. Wilder even actually threatened to leave Paramount after the studio had suggested deleting a Nazi reference in the German dubbed version of "Stalag 17".

There ARE Hollywood directors who are involved with their dubs – Stanley Kubrick comes to mind, but also Steven Spielberg – but they were primarily concerned with the voice casting, which is the most obvious difference between an original and a dubbed version.

But these are prominent exceptions. Otherwise, dubbers have pretty much been left alone for decades. And here we come to the – usually completely overlooked – second reason for changes that happen in the dubbing process: the nature of the workflow. Because dubbing is treated as part of postproduction, "left alone" often means: no information about the film to be dubbed is available other than the finished product. There's a video, and a script, and, if you're lucky, annotations (or a "creative brief"), which contain little more than the information that you could also get from just watching the film.

But the lack of information is only one result of the adaptation being treated as an afterthought. Dubbers have also had to deal with substandard materials to an alarming degree. A translation into German for a Bollywood film that contains only about half the words actually spoken because it was prepared from the English subtitles – no as-rec script in Hindi was available. Or as-rec scripts that were clearly not prepared by native speakers. At least I have no other explanation for how "Ayatollah Khomeini" got turned into "I got Toto Romini". Or video files in which burned-in timecodes or watermarks obscure entire faces. No wonder this leads to changes: that is, to mistakes and substandard adaptations.

And because the dub is considered postproduction, and there is little if any contact between creators of the original and creators of the dub, dubbing decisions are sometimes being made based on nothing but a hunch. "Peaky Blinders" at some point introduces the Shelby family's gypsy heritage. I'm using the term here, which I know is controversial, because it's what the screenwriters for the series used. It functions as a vile insult as well as a point of pride ("I am a gypsy queen" says Polly Shelby at some point).

When I wrote the dubbing scripts, starting with season 2, I wasn't aware that the German translation for "gypsy", "Zigeuner", isn't and was never used as a self-designation, and has never been seen as anything but the worst of insults. But when I tried to find alternatives later, I was faced with the fact that there isn't any term in German that could be used. All the other German terms are specific to a geographic location and can't be applied to someone in the UK. I looked at the snippets of language that Tommy Shelby and his family speak to find an indication of their origin. But the dialogue in that language wasn't transcribed ("speaks foreign language" has achieved a certain notoriety lately, but dubbers have been painfully familiar with that phrase for a long time), so I didn't have a text that I could have shown to an expert. I asked the dubbing company for contact to the original producers, to find answers, but was told that wasn't possible. I did convince them to consult a language coach for Romany. But Romany isn't what they are speaking. They are speaking a language that is mostly fantasy. The same is true for the customs that the Shelbys follow. The Peaky Blinders gypsies are made up.

Needless to say, knowing this would have saved us a lot of time and effort, but more importantly, it would have prevented us from using the German slur in the first place. We would have had a chance to be closer to the original intent. I'm grateful to this day that Neflix allowed me to go back and fix all this eventually, but the problem remains.

Then of course, the dubbing process can become difficult because the original creators for some reason fight dubbing tooth and nail. Most sources say that Jim Jarmusch doesn't allow his films to be dubbed, and he himself says that he hates it, but I wrote the dubbing scripts for three of his films and at least one was torpedoed by Jarmusch himself. In "Paterson", the main character is a poet. As he's putting pen to paper, and we hear him recite his poem in voice-over, the words appear one by one on the screen, his stream-of-consciousness producing a written, and visible, text, superimposed on the image. In reality, these

poems were written by Ron Padget. Now, I have published translations of exactly this style of poetry. I spent weeks researching. I memorized several of Padget's poems just to get a feel for their rhythm and patterns. But in the end I couldn't use any of it. Why?

Because Jarmusch refused to release a textless version of his material. So in the final German dubbed version, we hear German, but we SEE English. Which means that for the German voice-over, we were reduced to produce a line-by-line, very literal translation – basically spoken subtitles – so that the audience didn't feel too much of a disconnect between what they saw in English and what they heard in German. It was a translation that couldn't do justice to the amazing poetry that the film was all about. I wrote an impassioned plea to Jarmusch to take a leap of faith and let me translate the poems into German properly and have that translation appear on the screen. To this day I wonder whether he got the letter and whether I could have convinced him in person.

The suspicion of dubbed versions as changing the original was arguably already present when Key Names and Phrases lists and back translations came along, but dubbing into English has turned it into an actual issue. The problem is, unless you have a native-speaker grasp of the original AND the target language, you just have to TRUST your localization team to make the right decisions. And trust is a tricky thing.

When I had finished writing the dubbing script for the first new Star Trek film, I turned in the KNP document, stating character names, giving the back translation of Dr. McCoy's German nickname, Pille, as "Pill", and explaining why this is different from "Bones". I got the document returned almost immediately with the question, why was I suddenly coming up with a new nickname? Had I not understood the brief that said that we were supposed to go "back" to the "original" Star Trek series, and that his nickname was "Bones". I wrote back that what I used was indeed the original nickname. The German one, since we were dubbing into German. My email was returned with the comment

that "pill" wasn't the original nickname, it was Bones and we should stick to that. I answered that the original nickname wasn't "Bones" in German, but "Pille", which happens to mean "pill". And so it went until my lovely supervisor intervened and somehow explained to them a) how translation works, and b) that if this film was released with McCoy's nickname being anything else but "Pille", we would all be roasted over a small flame by German Trekkies.

This is one of my favorite "misunderstood dubbing scriptwriter" anecdotes but it also goes straight to the core of what I want to say today about dubbing.

Pille is Pille. A movie is a movie. When you go to the cinema, you don't go to see a foreign language film that's been translated into German. You go to watch a movie. It might be slightly different when you check out a show on a streaming platform, and have the choice between subs and dubs and captions. But once you've made that choice, and clicked on "dubbed", you don't watch a show that's been translated. The process of translation has disappeared. You watch a show. That IS the show. THAT is the magic of dubbing. The German dubbing industry association says, "We create the German original".

And that is the third, and the legitimate reason for "changes" during dubbing – acting in the service of that original.

People learn dubbing at the same age they learn how to watch a film. Anyone who's ever had to catch a 7-year-old fleeing a movie theater in panic when granny gets out the gun and starts shooting at Remy in "Ratatouille", will know that it takes a while for kids to understand that the things on the screen are not happening for real. And just because films aren't real, you don't call them fake. Films are a beautiful illusion. And so is dubbing.

You might ask, why dub at all? Social media are routinely subtitled, and wouldn't it be cheaper anyway to leave shows in the original version? I won't go into the old – and tiresome – subs v. dubs debate. Or ask how many languages you know well enough to be able to follow a dialogue.

Or expound on my theory that if you keep watching things in a language that you don't fully understand, everything will eventually become reduced to what you already know, and become random, flat, exchangeable content. I do want you to consider this:

Are you familiar with the trolley dilemma? Imagine standing on a footbridge, and looking down on a train track. An oncoming train is about to plow into five people, and kill them. The only way to stop that from happening would be to push a heavy man off the footbridge in front of the train. This will kill him, but save the five people. Now, are you going to make a utilitarian decision, save five, but become the murderer of one? Would you really push a fellow human being, flesh and blood, to his certain death to save five others? A scientific paper posed the dilemma to some people in their native language, to others in a foreign language that they spoke very well. To summarize: by more than half, people are more likely to make the utilitarian, rational decision – kill one, save five – when the dilemma is presented to them in a foreign language. They are more likely to react emotionally – keep the human being next to them alive – when it's presented to them in their mother tongue.

Now, is this direct, emotional reaction not exactly what we want from our audiences? An audience watching a dubbed film should have the same experience that an audience watching the original has. People relate to something in their native language with the emotional engagement that is the entire point of entertainment. This is why dubbing is magic.

Like special effects, the dub cannot be separated out from the rest of the film. And like special effects – or like film music – dubbing might technically be post-production because it happens after the rest of the film is – usually – finished. But for the audience, it's part of the original, it's simply what they're experiencing in the theater or on the sofa.

Dubbing is part of the cultural fabric of every country in which it exists. "Ich schau dir in die Augen, Kleines", that's what Humphrey Bogart says

to Ingrid Bergman, and that's what many a German lover has said to their beloved. Never mind that this isn't even close to a translation of what Bogart actually says in "Casablanca". For Germany, that sentence has become part of that film.

But dubbing is more than romance and childhood memories. Dubbing is something that generates a lot of income for a lot of people – who am I saying this to? It means the livelihood of many people here in this room, me included. Something like half of the revenue of any Hollywood production is generated through localization. No Hollywood film can break even without being distributed overseas. This realization, combined with the sudden awareness of the power of translation to "change" things, is making people nervous. It makes producers and distributors want reassurances that those damn foreigners don't wreak havoc with carefully curated, expensive content, with what people spend years developing and writing and rewriting, testing on audiences, and re-editing once more.

But how to do that, given that we're dealing with foreign languages and cultures that the producers of the original content probably have no knowledge of? How to establish that difficult trust?

We might start by understanding dubbers as creatives, as part of the art department, like film music composers or costume designers, with the relationship of creatives to the thing they have created. At this point, I wish that I was French, or Italian, because then I could say that what I do is doppiare, doublage, doubling. I don't work on a text. I build characters. I create twins for every original role, twins who are only different from their brothers and sisters in that they speak German. And I create a lot of them. With a lot of words. I wrote the dubbing script for "Shadow and Bone", sadly cancelled after two seasons. Rarely these days do you get the chance to write every episode of a show, and that means, I wrote every . single . word that every . character . speaks on the German "Shadow and Bone". That fills me with the immeasurable pride of a creator.

I give an audience an immersive experience, and I pour my heart and soul into that. I wrote the dubbing scripts for "Extras", and for the British "The Office", and when I saw Ricky Gervais live on tour recently, I couldn't stop looking at the stage and thinking, you don't know me, but very few people have spent as much time with you as I have. A colleague of mine has the characters of the first show for which she wrote the dubbing script literally tattooed on her leg, and one of the things I'm most proud of in my life was that I wrote a line for Leonard Nimoy as Spock. We might spend less time with our shows than the original creators, but we are no less invested in them.

So, we might build that trust by treating the adaptation process less as an afterthought, and more as part of the original production.

For many in the localization industry, dubbing is that arcane, expensive, tedious thing. It's annoyingly individual, it takes too long, and it resists streamlining and scalability. But "if you really want to scale something, get yourself a fish."

I realize this is somewhat flippant.

But I'd like you to think about this for a moment: It might very well be that the individuality, the individual personality, is the very thing that makes dubbing work. A dubbing script, the written-down dialogue, disappears the moment it's been recorded. Only when the written words are performed by voice actors do they acquire their meaning and that's because these words are processed through a brain and a soul as they are being spoken out loud.

If you've ever had the unfortunate occasion to give a eulogy to a loved one you will know the difference between the written word and the spoken one. Something happens to your voice when you say something that has emotional content. And there is a reason why, at many many weddings, the bride or groom, or both, stand there with a piece of paper containing their carefully written out vows and cannot finish, overcome with emotion, when they are saying them while looking into their beloved's eyes.

So, a dubbing script isn't a translation of a dialogue. It's not something that's in sync with the text of a continuity script. It's something that's in sync with a performance. Write – or read – a dubbing script and then attended the recording session, or watch the final result, and you will know.

A bad voice, or a distracted director, can give even the most carefully crafted script unintended meaning and ruin your best intentions. But good work in the recording studio can make your script soar way above what you've ever imagined and turn it into a magical experience in a movie theater.

To add a bit of science, a dubbing script is also more than the translation of a text because the processing of audio and video are inextricably intertwined in the brain. If you've never heard of the McGurk effect, I recommend checking it out. What you see influences what you hear and vice-versa, and your expectations and the context in which you experience something makes everything even more complicated.

So this is what dubbing does: It allows something that comes from the heart of a creator to go straight into the heart of an audience. Dubbing isn't just magic, it's music, it's poetry. A good dub is as emotionally engaging as the original. It's like a good conductor, providing a pathway for the original with the least possible resistance. The language barrier can never be broken, but you can climb over it – and dubbing is your ladder. If you care about your story, then take care of your dubbers. They CREATE the German, or Italian, or French ORIGINAL.

In an interview from last year, Netflix's Catherine Retat locates the competitive advantage in the quality of the adaptation. So invest in quality, technical as well as creative.

Invest in real dubbing expertise, that is, in expertise that knows the entire process. In providers of dubbed versions who can tell a lip sync dub from a voice-over, and who know how technical issues, or changes in the workflow – how a dubbing script is notated, for example, or how

it's looped – can influence a recording process and turn a poet in front of a microphone into a child that's been forced to memorize a Latin grammar book.

Don't leave the solution to creative problems up to the last-minute decision by a dubbing project manager who is stressed for time. If a dubbing studio – for example – only finds out weeks before production that they're going to need half a dozen experienced dubbing actors with Chinese-German accents, they might just have to make do with that one dubbing actor who happens to have a Japanese mom and is willing teach her colleagues an "Asian" accent.

Invest in the quality of the materials, like a precise, well-annotated as-rec script, and a crisp, non-watermarked video. Working in the safe environment of a cloud-based tool should eliminate the need for blurring or pixelling images for security reasons – great! – but it can be a horrible experience – and lead to significantly lower quality – if this tool is not also geared toward the needs of scriptwriters to reverse with frame-by-frame precision to an exact point.

Writing a lip-sync script, like all creative processes, depends on getting into a certain kind of flow – allow that to happen.

Invest in the best translation you can get (from the original language into the target language).

Invest in the training of dubbing scriptwriters.

Invest in a platform for an exchange of information between dubbers in the different territories. Spielberg used to fly in dubbing scriptwriters from all over the world to work on his films in offices side by side – in the age of Zoom and online platforms, there is no need for paying for airline tickets.

Screenwriters work in teams – why not dubbing scriptwriters? And why not dubbing scriptwriters and subtitlers and audiodescribers?

Invest in sophisticated glossary tools, and tools for flagging formality inconsistencies.

But most of all, invest in treating dubbing as part of the original. Identify the challenges that very specifically local content, or invented content might pose, or that come with extremely specific topics, whether it's medieval history or GenZ language or astrophysics.

Invest early in enabling a conversation between original and dubbing CREATIVES on how to localize themes that are tricky to adapt, or on how to treat them in your original to facilitate localization. You might even be faster. And you'll certainly be better.

Thank you. You've been very kind to listen.