

**SUBTITLES:  
ON THE FOREIGNNESS OF FILM**

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## INTRODUCTION

Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour

Images by Stefana McClure

Every film is a foreign film, foreign to some audience somewhere—and not simply in terms of language. The essays, interviews, and artworks in this collection take the figure of the subtitle as a point of departure in exploring the idea and the varieties of foreignness in film. Subtitles are only the most visible and charged markers of the way in which films engage, in direct and oblique fashion, pressing matters of difference, otherness, and translation. This collection is dedicated to unravelling what is at stake in such subtitled presentations and representations.

In the earliest phase of cinema there was no need for subtitles. Film was a silent medium and any written information—presented on cards between visual scenes—could be easily translated into any language and then physically cut into the print. Although the lips of silent film actors moved, the actors' exact choice of words was immaterial. Information and dramatic intention were conveyed by gesture, music, and precise textual information displayed on cards. Although these cards would often present dialogue in quotation marks (“I want to marry you” or “I’m going to kill you”), they often bore little relation to what the silent actor was actually saying. There was a lot of talking in silent films, but for all the words, at each screening only one language was legible: the written language of the target audience. There was little sense of a disjunction between the original language of the film’s actors and the language on the cards.

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The introduction of sound in the late twenties required new solutions to the problem of presenting dialogue to foreign audiences. The simplest solution – still practiced in some parts of the world – was to translate simultaneously the spoken text. This required the volume in scenes with dialogue to be turned down as a translator, sometimes speaking into an amplification system, presented his or her version of the text in the audience's native tongue. Often one and the same speaker presented the dialogue of numerous actors, rarely changing their emotional inflection of the text.

More commonly, dubbing is used to superimpose a second language over the original dialogue. In this process, professional actors are brought into a studio to record their translated lines. The words are then positioned sonically over the original dialogue. Music and sound effects are preserved from the sound track, and they are mixed with the replacement dialogue to achieve a sense of naturalness. If the performances are good, dubbing is a plausible way of making a film accessible to a foreign audience. In some countries, certain actors are consistently used to present a given star's lines. In Italy, for example, a certain dubbing actor will always be enlisted to dub Clint Eastwood's words. For Italians the movie star's iconic pronouncements ("Go ahead, make my day") will forever be associated with an Italian actor's voice.

The preferred technique for making foreign films accessible to a wider public is the subtitle. The subtitle was actually introduced as early as 1907, that is to say, still in the era of intertitles, but it did not really come into its own until the age of the talkies and their international distribution. The era of the modern subtitle was ushered in with the screening of *The Jazz Singer* in Paris in 1929, two years after its American release. Subtitles were quickly recognized by discriminating viewers as the most accurate way of preserving the director's and screenwriter's dramatic intentions. Technical or material

*Ran*: English subtitles to a  
film by Akira Kurosawa  
wax transfer paper mounted  
on rag, 32" × 50", 2003





constraints made subtitles, in the early days, labour-intensive and not all that cost-effective, though still only a fraction of the expense of dubbing. Over the course of its development, the process of subtitling has evolved from mechanical etching on the frame to chemical, laser, or optical burning. The technical advances have been uneven but relatively swift. In our time we have reached, at long last, a moment in which subtitles can now be programmed in the privacy of a filmmaker's home computer. Moreover, films can now easily be distributed with subtitles in multiple languages or even with multiple versions of subtitles in one language.

In this volume, subtitler Henri Béhar gives a vivid account of the profession, while others discuss the commercial, conceptual, and political dynamics of subtitling (Rich, Cazdyn, Sinha). At the same time, the idea of subtitles animates discussions of translation, otherness, representation, national identities, and the tasks of cultural interpretation. Thus the essays in *Subtitles* engage a wide range of ideas as to what constitutes the foreignness of film.

The interrelation of image and text, the movement from one to the other, is the subject of a number of projects. In Stephen Andrews's "Soundtrack" the artist makes sketches by hand sonograms of a recording of his voice reading a poem. And Deborah Esch's "Archive of Devastation," a meditation on Derek Jarman's *Blue*, recounts how "no ninety minutes of cinema could deal with the eight years HIV takes to get its host... the reality would drive the audience out of the cinema. We don't lack images—just good ones."

What constitutes a "good image"? In taking still photographs on the set of *The Sweet Hereafter*, photographer Johnnie Eisen took some "accidental" shots of the characters staring into his lens—discards revealing stark portraits of the characters in Russell

*Betty Blue (Director's Cut):*  
English subtitles to a film by  
Jean Jacques Beineix  
wax transfer paper mounted  
on rag, 24" × 30", 2003

Banks's novel. For these images Banks created "found" subtitles from his original text that could reflect on the emotional effect of the depictions. By taking these leftover images from the machinery of a film production (images that would otherwise never be used or seen), the writer is able to reclaim his authorial authority through a series of imaginary subtitles.

Sometimes a subtitle can provide access to spaces that would otherwise be indecipherable. Regarding a sequence from her film *Vendredi Soir* (Friday Night), Claire Denis describes a scene where her main character, from the distance of her car, is watching a couple inside a café. She sees them having a discussion, but can barely hear it. She's on the outside. The subtitles, on the other hand, present the dialogue with absolute clarity. When Claire Denis asked the subtitler if the text could be presented with missing letters or words—to reflect the viewer's experience of partial comprehension—she was told it would be impossible. The orthodoxy stated that "Either we have subtitles or we don't."

The iconic status of the subtitled screen in our time becomes strikingly visible in the art work of Stefana McClure. To make her drawings—each taking the title of one classic of Japanese or western cinema—she watches a film frame-by-frame and successively traces each subtitle on top of the others on a background of transfer paper. One is left with a monochrome screen whose only shapes are subtitles, or the blurry, faded indices of them. Often all we know is that there are—or once were—something like subtitles. But the subtitles remain as a kind of luminous fact, with the viewer facing the scene of translation and the difficulty of reading text and image together.

The presence of subtitles on a film screen might suggest that the only thing requiring translation is the words, as if images were somehow universally intelligible. Visual



economies, however, can be conditioned by regional or national particularity or even by the singularity of an artist's vision. Thus Frederic Jameson addresses the virtues of thinking of Balkan film as a regional cinema with distinctive features that tend to solicit, from the outside, a rather narrow range of predictable and uncomprehending responses. Even more pointedly, Negar Mottahedeh analyzes the idiomatic visual economy of women in Kiarostami's films. She demonstrates in painstaking detail how the peculiar, government-ordained strictures on how women can be filmed—even observed—structures Kiarostami's own visual dynamics, as well as the extent to which he can render problematic those constraints even as he works within them.

Beyond—or distinct from—questions of national or regional cinematic difference and stylistically coded forms of otherness, contributors to *Subtitles* also asked how film itself might be considered foreign, that is to say, non-natural, in its formal qualities. Mary Ann Doane analyzes the peculiarities of how time has been represented from the early days of film onward. Film, she shows, presents us with modes of time that scarcely have equivalents in our ordinary perceptions: film defamiliarizes time. Or Jarman's *Blue* offers a singular experiment in form, with its single, abiding blue screen. Such films can transform our perceptions and conceptions of the real, starting with what is closest to home. The foreign, we might even say, begins at home—which gives a rather different spin to Dorothy's mantra in *The Wizard of Oz*: "There's no place like home." Salman Rushdie—so keenly attuned to the dialectics of exile and diaspora—rewrites Dorothy's dictum to read "There is no longer any such place as home."

Films conscious of a certain foreignness, according to Hamid Naficy, negotiate the terrain of the subtitle as more than simply a supplement to the "original" language of the film:

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Multilinguality, which necessitates extensive titling, turns the film frame into a calligraphic page, contributing to the film's overall accent. In traditional "foreign films," subtitles mediate between a spoken source language and a written target language on the screen. . . . However, there is no single or original source language for many accented films, which are made in the interstices and astride several cultures and languages. Subtitling is thus integral to both the making and the viewing of these films.

In such films—so increasingly common now as to be making inroads even in the still pervasively monolingual American market—the very status of the foreign is changing. By the foreign, we by no means understand what usually counts as "exotica." Indeed, the vastly increased circulation of "world" film worldwide has had the salutary effect of making much of what once stood as exotic—in an old-fashioned *National Geographic* sort of way—a thing of the past. Globalization has left its prints on how cinema is made, circulated, and received. So when Brenda Longfellow takes up the pitfalls and possibilities of the contemporary anthropological gaze, she is describing one such shift. It's not as if globalization has resulted in a homogenized world cinema, with national, regional, and linguistic barriers fading to white or black: far from it. If Fredric Jameson can speak of a "geopolitical aesthetic," it is less to recognize the blending or levelling of differences than to suggest that, as of late, a world system is brought to bear in the production and reception of a vast array of films, however asymmetrically, across the globe. There surely is now a more highly articulated and integrated world system—thanks not least to the phenomenon of the international film festival—whereby cinema from Iran or Hong Kong takes its place alongside the now less hegemonic film production from European and American centres.

Even if at some levels and in some circles there is an unprecedented availability of

*Swimming Pool:*  
English subtitles to a film  
by François Ozon  
blue transfer paper  
mounted on rag,  
7.5" × 9.75", 2004

“foreign” films, Andrew Sarris has noted that the new generation of spectators “can’t be bothered with the foreignness of foreign films.” It’s hard to overestimate this popular resistance to subtitles, the stakes of which are detailed, in institutional and commercial terms, in Ruby Rich’s analysis of the monolingualism and xenophobia informing the American movie industry and American society more generally. This resistance has its tangled history, part of which is illuminated in John Mowitt’s account of what, in the world of American institutions such as the Oscars, has counted, at different times, as a “foreign film.”

These are clearly times when we need reflective, personalized – subtitled – images of how other people live their lives around the world. The popular Western media implies that news scenes of destroyed villages, of potential terrorists, and of subdued dictators are all the visual proof required to distinguish between “us and them.” But what we need are *subtitled* images – not an embedded journalist’s commentary – that extend, rather than preclude, the possibility of relating to others.

We need to make sense of the foreign on our own terms. We have to define what is foreign to our individual experience, before we can hope to understand the roots of collective misunderstanding. Subtitles offer a way into worlds outside of ourselves. They are a unique and complex formal apparatus that allows the viewer an astounding degree of access and interaction. Subtitles embed us.

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