

<b>Title</b>	Emotion capture: vocal performances by children in the computer-animated film
<b>Author(s)</b>	Holliday, Christopher
<b>Publication date</b>	2012
<b>Original citation</b>	Holliday, Christopher. "Emotion Capture: Vocal Performances by Children in the Computer-Animated Film". <i>Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media</i> 3 (Summer 2012). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.
<b>Type of publication</b>	Article (peer-reviewed)
<b>Link to publisher's version</b>	<a href="http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue%203/HTML/ArticleHolliday.html">http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue%203/HTML/ArticleHolliday.html</a> Access to the full text of the published version may require a subscription.
<b>Rights</b>	©2012, The Author(s) <a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ie/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/ie/</a>
<b>Item downloaded from</b>	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10468/1452">http://hdl.handle.net/10468/1452</a>

Downloaded on 2017-02-12T12:00:51Z



**UCC**

University College Cork, Ireland  
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

## Emotion Capture: Vocal Performances by Children in the Computer-Animated Film

Christopher Holliday, King's College London

**Abstract:** *The customary practice across both feature-length cel-animated cartoons and television animation has been to cast adults in the vocal roles of children. While these concerns raise broader questions about the performance of children and childhood in animation, in this article I seek to examine the tendency within computer-animated films to cast children-as-children. These films, I argue, offer the pleasures of “captured” performance, and foreground what Roland Barthes terms the “grain” of the child’s voice. By examining the meaningless “babbling” and spontaneous vocalisations of the aptly-named child Boo from Pixar’s *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), this article offers new ways of conceptualising the relationship between animation and voiceover, suggesting that computer-animated films celebrate childhood by emphasising the verbal mannerisms and vicissitudes of the unprompted child actor. The calculated fit between the digital children onscreen and the rhythms of their unrefined speech expresses an active engagement with the pleasures of simply being young, rather than privileging growing up. *Monsters, Inc.* deliberately accentuates how the character’s screen voice is authentically made by a child-as-a-child, preserving the unique vocal capabilities of four-year-old Mary Gibbs as Boo, whilst framing her performance in a narrative which dramatises the powers held within the voice of children.*

*I can still hear her little voice. (James P. “Sulley” Sullivan, *Monsters, Inc.*)*

From Walt Disney and Hanna-Barbera to *King of the Hill* (1997–2010) and *The Simpsons* (1989–), the orthodox practice among both feature-length cel-animated cartoons and television animation in America has been to cast adults in the vocal roles of children. The child labour laws in the U.S. that govern juvenile voiceover work, the physical stresses and strains that long hours can place on the child actor’s voice, and the fact that children’s voices change and mature as they grow, have all been factors regulating this practice. As Robin Beauchamp explains, “if the role is extended over time, a child’s voice will mature while the animated character will remain fixed in time. For this reason (and many others), adults are typically cast for children’s roles in episodic animation” (33–4). The often *atemporal seriality of television animation acts as a reminder of the discrepancy between the ageing vocal performer and the frequently ageless animated child*. With little fear that their beauty will wither, animated children remain timeless inside a graphic vacuum compared to the development of the child performers (and their voices) as they traverse adolescence towards adulthood. Nancy Cartwright, the voice of Bart Simpson for over twenty years, affirms that had *The Simpsons* creators hired a real ten-year-old boy in the role of Bart “he would have lost his job a long time ago” (qtd. in Lawson and Persons 100).

Computer-animated films have plotted a new trajectory for this convention of juvenile performance and the child’s voice that has come to dominate both television and feature-

length cel-animated cartoons. Whether the child character is that of a human, as in *The Polar Express* (2004), *Monster House* (2006) and *Up* (2009), or a non-human anthropomorphic figuration made ‘childlike’ as demonstrated in *A Bug’s Life* (1998), *Finding Nemo* (2003) and *Toy Story 3* (2010), animators have developed the child’s voice by deliberately casting children to play children. While observing child labour laws, computer-animated films uniquely foreground what Roland Barthes termed in the 1970s as the unique “grain” of the (child’s) voice, spotlighting the pleasures of a captured child performance and deliberately accentuating how the child character’s screen voice is authentically made by a child (182). It is the intention of this article to highlight this shift taking place in contemporary computer-animated film production. By examining the meaningless and spontaneous vocalisations of the aptly named human child Boo from Pixar’s *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), I show how computer-animated films celebrate childhood by emphasising the verbal mannerisms and vicissitudes of the unprompted child actor. *Monsters, Inc.* preserves the unique vocal capabilities of four-year-old non-actor Mary Gibbs as Boo, framing her performance in a narrative which animates the powers held within the voices of children. By jettisoning the more widespread adults-as-children casting tradition, computer-animated films present new ways of conceptualising the relationship between animation and child performance. The calculated fit between the digital children onscreen and the authentic rhythms of their unrefined speech expresses an active engagement with the pleasures of simply “being young”, rather than any privileging of “growing up”.

### **Adults-as-animated Children**

The pattern of casting adults-as-children is subject to, and ultimately reflective of, the child labour laws that currently operate in America. California has the most stringent laws protecting and governing the work of child actors—due to the majority of entertainment production that takes place there—which relate to occupational health and safety legislation, as well as enforcing the primacy of education (Krieg 429). Currently, children under thirteen can only be employed during the school holidays, while even fifteen-year-olds are permitted to work just three hours outside of school time per day. Accommodating the welfare of the juvenile performer, therefore, impacts on their availability as voiceover artists. Similar industrial stipulations have also affected child voiceover in the animation of other national cinemas. Jonathan Clements and Helen McCarthy have identified how child actors remain “rare in anime voice work”, as many voice recording facilities in Japan must “run around the clock in order to get the best returns from their investment in expensive machinery” (708). Children’s involvement in anime voiceover is typically restricted to movie productions, which require fewer hours in the recording booth than those of long running television series.

Managing the exploitation and preserving the safety of child performers is evidently an imperative of animated production. But enforcing the appropriate legislation does not prevent animation from being exposed to another type of risk, that which involves the unpredictability and uncertainty of the recorded performance itself. The wisdom of W.C. Fields’s oft-cited adage “never work with animals or children” is particularly pertinent in this context because of the immanent skills required of a voiceover artist. As Karen Lury explains, hiring child actors “increase[s] the possibility” that “they will do something unexpected and things will go ‘wrong’” (146). The amount of dialogue to work through, the ability to take direction and the sustaining of appropriate accents, pitch, tone and inflection, are all strains placed upon, and amplified by, the supposedly risky casting of children.

Finding children able to work under intense scrutiny is, according to animator Amy Steinberg, “no small feat”, and she claims that it is difficult for children to “understand the voice-over process, and how tedious and demanding it can be” (qtd. in Levy 151).

Each of these conditions of animated production has arguably contributed to the adults-as-children tendency. Numerous U.S. animated series such as *The Jetsons* (1962–63, and again from 1985–87), *The Little Rascals* (1982–84), *Rugrats* (1991–2004), *Futurama* (1999–), *Family Guy* (1999–), *The Wild Thornberrys* (1998–2004), *The Boondocks* (2005–) and, more recently, *Ben 10* (2005–), *American Dad!* (2005–) and *The Cleveland Show* (2009–) have all notably followed this prototype of casting. In the Nickelodeon (and later Disney) television series *Brand Spanking New! Doug* (1991–99), the eponymous title character was played by two adult actors—renowned American voiceover artists Billy West and Tom McHugh—despite Doug himself remaining at eleven-and-a-half years of age. There is further evidence of the adults-as-children practice in feature-length cel-animated cartoons, albeit in a less concentrated and expansive form (as befits their less-demanding production conditions). While this practice might be understandable in the industrial conditions of a long-running television cartoon format, it is perhaps surprising that the (naturally) shorter production time of feature-length animations seems to have had little impact. Following some early interest in child’s voices in *Bambi* (1942) and *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), the Disney studio has been sporadic in its use of child performers, and it began to lean towards adults-as-children in *Peter Pan* (1953), *The Sword in the Stone* (1963) and *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977) as well as more recent productions such as *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998). The renewed success of the studio’s musical format in their so-called post-1989 “Second Golden Age” renaissance has also created a discrepancy between singing and speaking voices, thereby introducing a new aspect to the voicing of animated children (Lyons 39–49). In *Mulan*, the eponymous sixteen-year-old Chinese warrior’s speaking voice was provided by thirty-five-year old Macau-born actress Ming-Na, and her singing voice by twenty-seven-year-old Filipina singer Lea Salonga-Chien. In short, the vocally challenging facets of animated voiceover (including the demanding element of singing), combined with specific labour laws and the inevitable maturing of the child’s voice over time, have presented adults as an altogether more practical and economic alternative to child actors.

Employing adult voice actors as younger children naturally raises some fairly significant questions about the nature of the voice—specifically conceptions of juvenile performance—in the field of animation. The adults-as-children blueprint at once reverses the more conventional practice of live-action cinema in which “adult actors rarely get to play children” (Lury 149). Given the frequency with which animators have turned to adults when casting for child roles, it is possible to suggest that in animation, by contrast, child actors rarely get to play children. Rather, child performance has its roots in the versatility and dexterity of an adult’s vocal range. The adult voiceover artist’s regression into a childlike mode of address—behaving childishly, so to speak—also holds the potential to associate child performance in animation not just with ambiguity, but with a compelling androgyny too. Voiceover artists such as Mae Questel in the 1930s, Jean Vander Pyl in the 1960s, and contemporary artists such as Cartwright, Russi Taylor, Tress MacNeille, Elizabeth Daily, Christine Cavanaugh and Pamela Adlon, not only cross generational divides in their voiceover work, but also those of gender. Adlon voices the overweight twelve-year-old teenager Bobby Hill in *King of the Hill*, while the majority of the male schoolchildren who attend Springfield Elementary in *The Simpsons* are voiced by women, including Nelson Muntz and Ralph Wiggum (Cartwright), Martin Prince (Taylor) and Millhouse van Houten

(Pamela Hayden). These actors constitute part of a broader trend in animated voicework, particularly on television, for females to assume the roles of younger male characters. Cross-gender performances of this nature are, by comparison, altogether rarer in computer-animated films. In *A Bug's Life*, for example, the presumed sex of the ladybird Francis is altered from female to male, and so the character's voice, provided by American actor and stand-up comedian Denis Leary, becomes naturalised by the deliberate switch in gender. In fact, the misapprehension that he is a genuine lady-bird is often the source of Francis' aggression and short temper in the film ("So, being a ladybug automatically makes me a girl. Is that it, fly boy?"). But in comically crafting Francis as a male, and despite having him perform a convincing drag act for the watching ant colony, *A Bug's Life* always ensures that Leary's voice remains reconciled with an animated image of the same-sex.

Any potential androgyny embodied within animated characters may ultimately operate only at the extratextual level, as a discourse informed by "making of" and "behind the scenes" featurettes which have become a prerequisite of film's post-cinema, commercial afterlife. It is not a requirement of the fiction to declare upfront its workings for comic or dramatic purposes, though it could opt to do so for any number of provocative reasons. Audiences of animation might therefore remain oblivious to the character's intersexuality, seduced by the aural capabilities of the vocal performer, and ultimately unsuspecting of the gender boundaries routinely being crossed. The publication of Cartwright's autobiography *My Life as a 10-Year-Old Boy* in 2000 (and her subsequent one-woman show based on the book) nonetheless suggests an apparent fascination, both inside and outside the industry, with the animated child's curiously hermaphroditic identity. What is striking in these instances, however, is not that the animated child lacks a definitive gender or age. Rather, it is how child performance in animation is (re)constructed as a curiously complex space between genders and ages through cross-gender, cross-generational vocal casting. Bart's well-established rebellion and continued mutiny against authority within the televisual world of *The Simpsons* ("Eat my shorts" and "Don't have a cow, man!" being his favoured phrases) might therefore stand for animation's wider rejection of vocal norms. Indeed, through its fundamental sound/image relations, animation can permit this body-swapping act of transgender with minimal exertion, allowing adults of either sex or age to play male or female children. In the complex hybrid figure of Bart Simpson, "an ordinary looking, all-American mother" is placed, through the voice, inside the body of a rebellious, dysfunctional male pre-teen (Brooks). The child star of animation is thus a hollow prosthesis which can be gendered and aged with little regard for the vocal source, and the adult performer is able to instantaneously reorient their identity to engineer a "child performance".

Computer-animated films break new ground within the traditions of animation voiceover by replacing the adult vocal performer, whose regression into childlike speech patterns and inflection is achieved entirely through tonal flexibility and skill, with a multitude of (often) untrained and inexperienced child voice artists. The youthful computer-animated characters they voice therefore depart from the cross-gender and cross-generational template established in traditional cel-animation, as they do not have their vocals recreated by adults who have long outgrown these kinds of distinctive speech rhythms. By habitually casting children to play their child characters, computer-animated films have crafted a screen space in which these young performers are able to actively and organically speak, stumble, mispronounce, splutter and cough whilst at all times staying true to their intrinsic childishness. The verbal expressiveness that is held within these young voices is subsequently presented in a variety of arresting ways to an audience who, with every utterance made by the

child character onscreen, are invited to read and reflect upon the nuances of a genuine child performance that is being communicated.

### **Going with the Grain: *Monsters, Inc.* and the Child's Voice**

The child voice artists working in recent computer-animated films represent the emergence of an exciting new wave in voicing practice. They stretch from more familiar teen performers, including renowned pop stars like Avril Lavigne in *Over the Hedge* (2006), Miley Cyrus in *Bolt* (2008) and Selena Gomez in *Everyone's Hero* (2006) and *Horton Hears a Who!* (2008), to non-professional non-actors (frequently relatives of the production staff) performing in their first—and sometimes only—screen roles. In *Rio* (2011), the director's daughter Sofia Scarpa Saldanha provides the voice of protagonist Linda Gunderson as a child, while in her role as Young Ellie, Elizabeth Docter was directed by her father Pete in *Up*. In some instances, offspring of the main vocal star have been used in minor speaking roles, either in conjunction with their more famous parents, or as younger versions of the same character. Seven-year-old Quinn Stiller has acted alongside his father, American actor Ben Stiller, in DreamWorks' *Megamind* (2010), a film in which another of Stiller's children, ten-year-old Ella, also appears. For a flashback sequence in the studio's earlier film *Madagascar: Escape 2 Africa* (2008), Quinn Stiller also plays the infant incarnation of Alex the Lion, a character who is otherwise voiced by his more celebrated real-life parent. There are certainly numerous computer-animated films which testify to this notable campaign of casting such unknown or inexperienced child performers in the vocal roles of children. Daryl Sabara in *The Polar Express*, Spencer Fox in *The Incredibles* (2004); Jordan Fry and Michael Josten in *Meet the Robinsons* (2007); Freddie Benedict in *Planet 51* (2007); Jordan Nagai in *Up*; Jay Baruchel in *How To Train Your Dragon* (2010); Emily Hahn and Beatrice Miller in *Toy Story 3* and Seth Dusky in *Mars Needs Moms* (2011) are just some of the young child actors who have been cast to play human children with little to no acting experience.

A key distinction to make among computer-animated films, however, is that humans are not the only juveniles populating their fictional worlds. In fact, they are often in the minority, marginalised by a variety of non-human anthropomorphs which so frequently supplant them as protagonists. According to Lury, "the child as 'thing' has a history in numerous stories and films where the child is, or becomes, a doll, puppet or robot" (66). According to their strong anthropomorphic thrust, computer-animated films consistently dramatise this child-as-object tradition by transferring the child's voice onto a variety of non-human figures. Born in 1997, child performer Shane Baumel has played both a child ant in *The Ant Bully* (2006) and a young porcupine in *Over the Hedge*; at the age of eight, Alexander Gould voiced the eponymous clownfish in *Finding Nemo*, whilst a variety of younger unknown actors were cast as the remainder of the film's aquatic schoolchildren. The opening line of *Finding Nemo* immediately establishes the formal importance of such authentic voiceover. Shouting excitedly at his father Marlin that today is the "first day of school... oh boy", Nemo's childish dialogue (captured by Gould) is implicated in a narrative context that takes as its subject matter a particular milestone in a child's development.

In the more recent example of the Peas-in-a-Pod from *Toy Story 3*, the grain of the child's voice assumes a key role in the immediate coding of the toy as one of these non-human children. Genderless when mute and impassive, the Peas-in-a-Pod are brought to life through the voice casting of three unknown child actors: Charlie Bright (Peatey), Amber

Kroner (Peatrice) and Brianna Maiwand (Peanelope). The voice of the children as made by children fits closely with the specific design of the toy, making it conducive to this type of child casting. Based on the “Vegimals” series of stuffed toys which were manufactured in the 1970s, these toys/characters comically reprise the sixteenth-century maxim “like two peas in a pod”. Proximity, similarity and conflict are each manifest in the sibling rivalry between the young children, who argue, complain and attempt to outdo one another. The child voice also reflects their sheltered existence, development and growth. Their confined, protected state in the pod suggests that, like young children held captive in a playpen, they are permitted to observe, rather than participate, in the events around them. *Toy Story 3* therefore mediates the nuances of the vocal track through a non-human object, one which is incapable of speech in the “real” world of the cinema auditorium. As Michel Chion suggests of the human voice, “the ear is inevitably carried toward it, picking it out, and structuring the perception of the whole around it” (5). While computer animation’s aesthetic might always mask the actor’s appearance for the spectator behind a digital veneer, the grain of the child’s voice can nonetheless be “picked out” precisely because it emanates from such an unusual (anthropomorphic) source. Equally, the diverse kinds of virtual bodies which can emit the voice are reciprocally contextualised by the unique aural characteristics of the childish grain. In perceiving the novelty of a non-human speaker, the spectator’s ear is ultimately drawn to a child’s voice as it becomes magnified by the onscreen anthropomorph itself.



The Peas-in-a-Pod toy is animated into “childhood” in *Toy Story 3*.

Many other computer-animated films have mobilised the child’s voice, whether spoken by human or non-human characters, within narratives that appear specially shaped to fit the contours of their exceptional vocal qualities. *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009) opens in flashback inside a school classroom, and a “show-and-tell” presentation by young inventor Flint Lockwood. Unveiling his “Spray-On Shoes” science project, Max Neuwirth’s voice as the young Lockwood provides the sequence with its soundtrack: his stuttering, nervy commentary a counterpoint to the remarkable sophistication, and ultimate failure, of his scientific invention. The authentic voices of children are also ensconced into the narratives of both *Meet the Robinsons* and *Despicable Me* (2010), attaining greater impact through each film’s treatment of the emotional plight of young orphans. A brief scene from *Despicable Me* illuminates how the film directs the spectator towards, and crafts a space for, the “materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue” (Barthes 182). Following her ritual bedtime prayer that “someone will adopt them soon”, the youngest orphan Agnes (voiced by seven year old Elsie Fisher) playfully sings herself to sleep, much to the annoyance of her

two sisters Edith and Margo, voiced by child actors Dana Gaier and Miranda Cosgrove. Agnes's undetectable oral expressions, indecipherable utterances and meandering vocalisations are permitted to echo in the otherwise silent bedroom of the orphanage, whilst her verbal childishness and playfulness only enhances the poignancy of this short but significant scene. Certainly the most unusual and unexpected application of children's voices in computer-animated films, however, occurs in *Wall-E* (2008). To make the robot protagonists Wall-E and EVE read for the spectator as emotionally resonant, the film's sound designer Ben Burtt, who lent his own voice to Wall-E, based their electronic language on the intonation of young children, to make them sound "like a toddler... 'Oh,' 'Hm?,' 'Huh!,' you know? This sort of thing" (qtd. in Anon.). Although the mechanised robots hold an indeterminate and unexplained age, Burtt's role in creating Wall-E's voice, alongside Elissa Knight's performance as EVE (modified by Burtt), resulted in a compelling and unusual instance of computer-animated childishness.

Yet it is within an earlier computer-animated film that the unrefined speech patterns and "materiality" of a young child's voice are most explicitly and persistently (re)valued. The narrative of Pixar's fourth feature-length film *Monsters, Inc.* is framed entirely around the voices of children, from the screams converted to energy which power the city of Monstropolis, to the traditional happy ending conclusion in which children are now plundered for laughter that is, according to protagonist James P. "Sulley" Sullivan, "ten times more powerful" than screams. This power contained within the child's voice (the narrative refuses to acknowledge the impact of adult screams or laughter) immediately indicates how central a role the child's voice will play within the film's aural register. The power of the child's voice is particularly conveyed by *Monsters, Inc.*'s main human character, a two-year-old infant affectionately named Boo by Sulley, her name derived from her signature vocal expression. Whereas the other (often anonymous) children's screams are instantly preserved in canisters ready for industrial use, the energy emitted by Boo's verbalisations manifests externally and dramatically. The screams, cries and whimpers which emanate from her like an electrical current, cause lights to flicker, bulbs to blow and a surge of power across the entire city of Monstropolis.

The casting of Mary Gibbs, the daughter of Pixar story artist Rob Gibbs, as Boo certainly marks this new engagement with authentic child performance in the field of contemporary computer-animated films. Initially intended to provide only a provisional voice track to layer over the rough story reels, Gibbs's voice was retained when Boo's age was changed from six to four years during pre-production. According to the character's lead animator Dave Devan:

Mary's performance really inspired us. The quality of her voice is great and was lots of fun to work with. She was really playful and gave the character exactly what was needed. (qtd. in "Production Notes")

The quality of Gibbs's voice, as described here by Devan, suggests some of the material properties of Barthes's grain, pointing towards the intrinsic vocal power held within her voice which has at its core the materiality and embodiment of the speaker. In particular, the tonal qualities of Boo's voice can be productively defined in terms of what studies of child language have labelled as infant "babbling". The phonological capacity of young children has been well-debated by linguists and psycholinguists since the 1940s, particularly in relation to the (dis)continuity between early "babbling" and the subsequent formation of pronounced



speech (Oller 28). But while writers such as Roman Jakobson have suggested that “babbling” had little to do with the onset of later linguistic systems and was merely symptomatic of “purposeless tongue delirium”, subsequent commentators have strongly refuted Jakobson’s claims, and championed the presence of ambient language even in the “babbling” states of language acquisition and experimentation (Oller 78). Conducted over the last three decades, this research has specified the ordered pattern in which language in children progresses: a process which can help to “age” the voices of a variety of child performers. Following a pre-linguistic stage which has been labelled “canonical babbling”, children adopt intonational structures called “jargon babbling” towards the end of their first year, which refers to vocalisations and utterances “that resemble highly adult speech in at least certain characteristics” (Kent and Miolo 333). The phonetic and acoustic arrangements of these early vocalisations are coupled with tendencies towards imitation and mimicry, as the child explores their larynx through imitative processes which test out its capabilities. As Steven Pinker puts it in his book *The Language Instinct* (1994), “the infant is like a person who has been given a complicated piece of audio equipment bristling with unlabeled knobs and switches but missing the instruction manual” (266). The child’s creation of their own personalised “instruction manual” through investigational “babbling” is ostensibly a formative process in which they discover the grain’s phonology and sonicity for themselves.

Gibbs’s performance in *Monsters, Inc.*, recorded at the time when she was only two-and-a-half years old, is framed by these dual concepts of “jargon babbling” and by the trialling of her own vocal articulators. Boo playfully picks up numerous words and individual phrases uttered within the fiction, incessantly repeating “Mike Wazowski” and “Kitty” (her self-originated nickname for Sulley) to accompany her cacophony of squeals, shrieks, laughs and cries. These utterances were central to the subsequent release of the tie-in “Babblin’ Boo” toy doll which gurgled, sang and mumbled lines from the original film. Such merchandising for a popular children’s film like *Monsters, Inc.* evidently reflects a certain commercial, even exploitative, interest in the lack of clarity and lucidity to Boo’s voice. Yet Gibbs’s own phonological units and utterances are suggestive of a tentative form of lexical development, as she is shown to familiarise herself with the monster world through repetition and imitation. Consisting of only three complete words, Boo’s speech and the way that she learns words become paramount to the films’ expression of youthfulness. *Monsters, Inc.*’s director Pete Docter explains that Gibbs was “a *real* little kid who’s sort of on the cusp of language, and we just used that gibberish sound” (qtd. in Neuwirth 160; author’s emphasis). The in-between state of Boo’s language asserts a different kind of voice repertoire within the context of child performance in animation, crafted according to aural mispronunciation and authentic crudities which confirm its source as that of a real child. In fact, as Docter continues when discussing the tentative efforts by the animators to create their own version of a childish voice during pre-production, “it really took you out of the film to have an adult doing a kid’s voice” (qtd. in Duncan 26).



**Boo makes her entrance into Monstropolis.**

It is certainly not uncommon for animated film and television to mobilise an entirely contrived child performance founded upon the corruption of the character's identity through an incongruous and highly comical vocal track. Rather than craft a juvenile performance which approximates to a younger speech pattern, as was evidently the aim in *Monsters, Inc.*, animation can of course provide the option to confront directly—and take advantage of—the casting of adults-as-children through an explicit rejection of aural naturalism. Best remembered in this spirit are the performances of two well-known animated children: Baby Herman, the three-year-old juvenile star of the live-action/animated hybrid *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988), and the one-year-old Stewie Griffin from the FOX television series *Family Guy*. Each of these child characters negotiates between a pre-pubescent aesthetic and the erotic impulses of an adult, raising onscreen tensions between innocence and experience that is consciously avoided in computer-animated films like *Monsters, Inc.* As Herman himself concedes angrily at one moment, “the problem is I got a fifty-year-old lust and a three-year-old dinky”. Herman's infant physiognomy and juvenile identity are offset against a violent, cigar-smoking, stern and foul-mouthed persona. Any notion of child performance is eclipsed and corrupted (deliberately so) by the voice casting of gruff American actor Lou Hirsch, whose determining identity subsumes Herman into a performance akin to that of a middle-aged man.

Provided by *Family Guy* series creator Seth MacFarlane, the foppish English accent of Stewie—which was based on British actor Rex Harrison's performance in *My Fair Lady* (1964)—is utilised to orchestrate his character into that of an uncharacteristically refined specimen. Stewie is more eloquent, fluent, legible, verbose, coherent and worldly than the adults who share his animated screen. Concealed behind the character of a child prodigy holding a violent obsession with matricide, Stewie's helplessness as a true child only sporadically manifests. Unlike Boo, whose identity as a curious and naive child is never contaminated, Stewie is predominantly defined through his adulthood: elaborate scientific inventions, murderous propensities and advanced vocabulary. More contentious is the flaunting of Stewie's bisexual tendencies, with certain episodes even depicting him indulging in cross-dressing fantasies (“We Love You, Conrad” and “Go Stewie Go”). There is evidence of similar gender-bending strategies at work across both *The Simpsons* and *South Park* (1997–present) as the animated children (again voiced by adults) frequently indulge in gender-swapping, but also foul-mouthed tirades and masochism that sits uneasily with the supposed innocence of a child.

The dramatic re-appropriation of childhood identity by a range of animated films and television programmes, and avoided in computer-animated films, recalls certain theatrical practices of Elizabethan England in which, as Jane O'Connor recognises, "young boys played the parts of women and sometimes old men, as well as children, in Shakespearean plays" (39). But where Elizabethan theatre was criticised by Puritans "scandalized by the sight of young boys cross-dressing as much older women", animation often textually organises child performance and choose to emphasise a maturity that goes beyond their true screen age. However far animators go in drawing attention to these internal conflicts, the juvenile performances made by adults-as-children also align with Lury's description of the performance style often required of child stars, such as Shirley Temple's in *Baby Burlesks* (1932–33), a series of eight one-reel films satirising the film industry. Lury writes:

The children are not playing "children", and what is prized, flaunted and controlled is not their childishness but their littleness and their ability to simulate white adult behaviour. (66)

In her 1988 autobiography, Temple herself described her experience working on *Baby Burlesks* as "a cynical exploitation of our childish innocence" (16). However, the uneasy organisation of children into performance during studio-era Hollywood reprises the working relationship between animator and animated figuration, puppeteer and puppet. Lury recognises a similar quality in the unnatural manipulation of the child actor's body, which at its most crude and exploitative can evoke "the animation of a body without agency" (66). While this lack of activity may apply to the ageless animated child fixed in screen time, it also pertains to a treatment of child performance which is open to sustained reconfiguration and adjustment. By having animated children, such as Baby Herman and Stewie, "acting, dancing, talking—in a manner that they are not meant to be able to do", their status as child-as-object in non-computer animation is exposed and exhibited. The result is what Lury calls a "fascinating and disturbing (freaky)" construction of child performance, not only because the animation process is itself "uncanny" in its giving of life to the inanimate, but because the child's performance onscreen is shaped according to a fundamental strangeness (66). But the fascination and freakiness of child performance in animation not only resides at this textual level, but infiltrates the extra-diegetic voiceover as it is performed and executed. The very idea of an adult performing as a child is fundamentally freaky and troubling as, like Temple's performances in the 1930s and 1940s, the boundaries between adult and child become increasingly fluid. As a dubbed effigy into which life can be breathed by an adult through ventriloquism, the animated child (as object, rather than subject) is frequently predicated on an identity that they never truly have in the real world, as they are always informed by an adult's recreation of childhood. Framed in this way, the concept of child performance in animation both in cinema and on television, from production to reception, can be highly complex, and often anything but wholly juvenile.

Where computer-animated films, and in particular *Monsters, Inc.*, mark new territory for the practice of child performance in animation is through the omission of the freaky and disturbing recreations of childishness. Opting to "capture" the child performance, rather than having it vocally crafted by adults, this deviation in itself "closes off" the vocal freedom with which adults can (and have) produced humorous voices and accents for child characters. Invested in the mechanisms of childhood, computer-animated films offer a different set of pleasures, which are constructed around the ownership of the voice and the breathy intonations of an authentic child performer. What is being "prized, flaunted and controlled" is

no longer merely their status as small people, but a new element of childishness which is achieved through the meaningfulness of the vocal track (Lury 66).

*Monsters, Inc.* repeatedly (re)turns to the meaningful purity and lack of clarity in Boo's voice and her unrefined "babbling". The film celebrates her imperfect enunciations and sporadic high-pitched repetition of dialogue in a manner reminiscent of the unscripted interaction between adults and children. Such interaction was first popularised by the "Kids Say the Darndest Things" segment on Art Linkletter's radio programme *House Party* (1945–67), and later the U.S. television series *Kids Say the Darndest Things* (1998–2000) presented by actor Bill Cosby, and the British equivalent *Kids Say the Funniest Things* (1998–2000). Linkletter's original series even prompted a series of *Kids Say the Darndest Things!* tie-in books (Dunning 333). The quips and unintentionally comedic observations made by children on a variety of subjects were illustrated by *Peanuts* cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, and each volume was introduced by Linkletter's personal friend Walt Disney (Dunning 333). While the monsters' engagement with Boo does not celebrate the curious wisdom of children in such a clear-cut manner, the playful fallibility of Boo's language and her "jargon babbling" recreates the unscripted and unrehearsed interaction between adults and children that has so often been the source of comedy.

*Monsters, Inc.* also utilises Boo's "jargon babbling" (and her broader inability to formulate complete, coherent sentences) to define her character, and it is this connection between the audio and the visual which enables the film to develop Boo's voice to aurally track her location. This is especially resonant in a narrative which sources comedy from the monsters' reluctance to touch children on account of their supposed toxicity, and their consequent reliance upon their other senses. When Boo is first discovered by Sulley twenty minutes into the film, having wandered through the portals which separate the human and monster worlds, the playful noises she emits draw attention to her location and mark her entrance into the fiction. Boo therefore exists as a specific set of sounds before she is raised into any existence as a computer-animated image. The oratory traits thus define her character from the outset, functioning throughout as a narrative shorthand. Later, when Sulley and Mike attempt to smuggle Boo into the Monsters, Inc. HQ by dressing her in a synthetic monster costume, it is Boo's compelling and engaging speech patterns which provide a clue as to her true human identity. Here, the veiling of Boo as momentarily monstrous reflects the masking of Gibbs within a virtual body. While her computer-animated visage is created from scratch, Gibbs's captured vocal track remains intact. The qualities carried in the voice (the unique grain) are maintained, even while the camouflage that cloaks her humanity is altered onscreen from human to non-human. It becomes clear, then, that Gibbs's voice plays a clear structuring role, organising the virtual space in a manner akin to Mary Ann Doane's description of how sounds function from the perspective of a child. In "The Voice in Cinema" (1980), Doane suggests that for children, space is traced along the "axis of sound", as the voice of the mother and of the father (sound rather than the language) exist as the "instrument of demand". In comparison to restrictive sight or look, Boo's voice and signature "babbling" echo along corridors and the Scare Floor, affirming a capacity to be heard "around corners, through walls" (Doane 44). This is most evident during the mischievous hide-and-seek sequence in the bathrooms of the Monsters, Inc. HQ. Boo's vocal freedom matches her playful energy and obliviousness as she innocently staggers through their world, her organic but unsteady movements strikingly indicative of a child who has only recently learned to walk.



Disguised as a monster, Boo's "jargon babbling" structures the virtual space.

It is the final shot of *Monsters, Inc.*, however, which dramatically marks the child's voice in terms of its influence upon the virtual space. Following Boo's incarceration back into the human world and her emotional separation from Sulley, the film's epilogue is ostensibly the reunion of human child and monstrous surrogate parent (Boo's human parents remain unseen). Yet the emotional impact of the moment is paradoxically rooted in the drama of their non-meeting, insofar as Boo is typically only heard rather than seen. As Sulley tentatively peers into Boo's room whispering her name, his attention is caught by the familiar sound of Boo as she exclaims "Kitty!" one last time. By refusing to cut to Boo as she speaks, her union with Sulley is thus strongly played out along the "axis of sound", rather than through any kind of physical contact. Boo's absence places stylistic emphasis once again upon the language of a child which pierces the visible from an undetermined offscreen space, all the while anchoring Boo again in terms of her aural rhythms. Robert Velarde identifies this moment as the expression of the "joyful voice of a human child", and it is clear from the central framing of Sulley, and the attention given to his reaction, that the youthfulness of Boo's voice fills him with similar gratification (61). Indeed, despite the spectator being consciously positioned in the gulf between two speakers and, thus, between competing sounds, the focus remains on Sulley's reaction. If Sulley's first response to Boo was histrionic and sensational (expressively gurning his face and contorting his large physique in horror at this supposedly toxic child), he now beams with pleasure as the film fades to black. Without any closing shot of Boo, Sulley (like the spectator) is essentially reacting only to the material assets of the human voice, that is, the grain to which *Monsters, Inc.* has so often turned. The climax therefore encapsulates the sound/image relations which have run through the entirety of the film: whereas the monsters are consistently classified by how they look (as absolutely appropriate to their profession as "scarers"), children are always defined through the authentic dynamism of how they sound.



Sulley reacts to the “grain” of Boo’s voice in the final shot of *Monsters, Inc.*

The spontaneous and energetic vocal performances made by children, which are an expanding feature of computer-animated films, naturally invite several questions to why they continue to dominate this new era of all-digital filmmaking. It remains highly unusual for adults to voice children, and the adults-as-children performances of Zach Braff in *Chicken Little* (2005), Sarah Vowell in *The Incredibles* and Sarah Silverman in *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) are certainly the exception in this case, rather than the rule. Might the decision to cast children-as-children feed into the fervent and well-rehearsed debate surrounding the perceived childishness of computer-animated films, and their cultural status as juvenile entertainment? The set of assumptions erected around what Tom Sito has called the “horseplay” or artistic indulgence of animators who, as they animate, must “maintain a bit of their inner child to create for the child in all of us”, is reflected in a similar assumption that the adult voice artists through “funny voices” nurtures a childlike inflection as they speak (46). Child voiceover therefore sidesteps the insincere “horseplay” traditionally associated with animation and its voiceover techniques, legitimising computer-animated films to preserve a degree of artistic integrity and audible authenticity.

The deployment of children to play children might also heighten the capacity of computer-animated films to seduce, compel, charm and engage inasmuch as it manipulates a key problem with child acting, that of acting versus being. A frequent criticism of child performance centres on the charge that the most acclaimed and affective performances by children in film “emerge when they are not acting at all”, and therefore they exist as nothing more than “captured actuality” (Lury 10). Gibbs’s vocal performance, as described in Docter’s account of the voice-recording sessions, certainly highlights this troubling quality:

At first we tried just having her stand in front of a mike; and I would say, “Act really scared,” or “Pretend like you’re this or that.” And she was like, “Nyuhh,” not really into it. So what we ended up doing was giving her a lot of sugar and following her around with a boom mike, recording whatever she did naturally. (qtd. in Duncan 26)

The fruitless attempts made by Mike and Sulley to detain Boo, following her voice up, through and across Monstropolis (and, in the film’s visceral climax, through a series of doors), playfully animates these methods by which Gibbs’s organic vocal performance was originally captured. Yet a certain anxiety persists in how Gibbs was evidently duped by the

filmmakers. If there is evidence of the patience and persistence required to capture a lead performance from a particularly young child, this is tempered by the knowledge that Gibbs was effectively “artificially sweetened” to elicit a specific kind of energy. The disclosure of how Gibbs’s organic vocal performance was directed draws attention to the blurred lines and compelling uncertainty between consciously acting and passively being.

The technological mediation of the voice track is also an important element of computer-animated film production, one that heightens these anxieties further. Gibbs’s vocal track, which was cut together from her sporadic vocalisations and impromptu “babbling” to create one long audible stream, would seem to discredit any claims of authentic acting. However, the captured vocal performances of children-as-children in computer-animated films may problematise, and render altogether more fluid, some of the previous distinctions between child acting and being. The child performer’s authentic being (as manifest in their voice) is recombined and (re)contextualised into a vocal performance which relies precisely on the force of the being itself. Initially delivered without the burden of meaning, it is the naturalistic actuality of an unfamiliar and untrained voice which remains so central to the impact of a film like *Monsters, Inc.*, and to the simple authenticity of Boo as a believable juvenile character. Gibbs’s performance in *Monsters, Inc.* might be nothing more than “captured actuality”, but it is certainly nothing less, and should not be governed by any assumption that she is not acting at all. So, while Gibbs might not be voice acting in a conventional sense, she is nonetheless performing her own childish identity, and is crucially given space by the film to do so.

Indeed, despite its mediation, the novelty of Gibbs’s captured vocal performance, complete with breathy intonations and unrefined inflection, is left audibly intact. The innate semantic and lyrical structures of the child’s voice are consciously maintained without aural modification, and this purity ruptures the performer’s digital costume to remind spectators of the real human source living inside. Rather than create an animated child star as a hollow prosthesis which can be gendered and aged accordingly, *Monsters, Inc.* creates a closer ontological proximity between the child performer and the child performance. In computer-animated films, capturing the authentic pitch, timbre and tone of a child’s voice has proven more of an attractive proposition to animators than the default tradition in animated film of having an adult craft a juvenile vocal performance. Such an emerging fascination in the ownership of the child’s voice (and its grain) reflects a further interest in the broader elements of childhood: the mannerisms of speech, the immaturity of language and other phonic tics which become irretrievably lost as the child moves from infancy into adolescence, and finally adulthood. Here, the uniquely ageless computer-animated body might help to crystallise and preserve the “babbling” sounds and other crude or illegible vocalisations made by children. The body incarcerates and holds captive the juvenile vocal performance, protecting it inside its animated shell as part of a resistance to growing up. Within this context of simply being young, it seems that following years of screen silence, it is in computer-animated films that children are finally being given a voice.

## Works Cited

*Aladdin*. Dir. Ron Clements, John Musker. Walt Disney Productions, 1992. Film.

- A Bug's Life*. Dir. John Lasseter. Pixar Animation Studios, 1998. Film.
- Alice in Wonderland*. Dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske. Walt Disney Productions, 1951. Film.
- American Dad!* 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, 2005–present. Television.
- Anon. “Voice of ‘WALL-E’: Robot sounds toddler-inspired”. *Associated Press*, 28 June 2008.  
<<http://www.azcentral.com/ent/movies/articles/2008/06/28/20080628wallevoice.html>> Web. 15 June 2012.
- The Ant Bully*. Dir. John A. Davis. DNA Productions, 2006. Film.
- Baby Burlesks* (Series of one-reel films). Dir. Charles Lamont. Educational Pictures, 1932–33. Film.
- Bambi*. Dir. James Algar, Samuel Armstrong, David Hand, Graham Heid, Bill Roberts, Paul Satterfield, Norman Wright. Walt Disney Productions, 1942. Film.
- Barthes, Roland. *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Steven Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. Print.
- Beauchamp, Robin. *Designing Sound for Animation*. Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2005. Print.
- Black, Shirley Temple. *Child Star: an Autobiography*. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1988. Print.
- Bolt*. Dir. Chris Williams and Byron Howard. Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2008. Film.
- The Boondocks*. Adelaide Productions, 2005–present. Television.
- Brand Spanking New! Doug*. Nickelodeon and The Walt Disney Company (1996-1999). 1991–1999. Television.
- Brooks, Tom. “Bart’s voice tells all”. *BBC News*, 10 Nov. 2000.  
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/1017238.stm>> Web. 15 June 2012.
- Cartwright, Nancy. *My Life as a 10-Year-Old Boy*. New York: Hyperion Books, 2001. Print.
- Chicken Little*. Dir. Mark Dindal. Walt Disney Pictures, 2005. Film.
- Chion, Michel. *The Voice in Cinema*. Trans. Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Print.
- Clements, Jonathan and Helen McCarthy. *The Anime Encyclopaedia: A Guide to Japanese Animation since 1917*. Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2006. Print.



- The Cleveland Show*. Persons Unknown Productions, 2009–present. Television.
- Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. Dir. Phil Lord, Chris Miller. Columbia Pictures, 2009. Film.
- Despicable Me*. Dir. Pierre Coffin and Chris Renaud. Illumination Entertainment, 2010. Film.
- Doane, Mary Ann. “The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space”. *Yale French Studies* 60. Cinema/Sound (1980): 33–50. Print.
- Duncan, Jody. “Monsters in the Closet”. *Cinefex* 88:1 (2002): 15–26, 113–14. Print.
- Dunning, John. *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio*. Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Everyone’s Hero*. Dir. Colin Brady, Christopher Reeve, Dan St. Pierre. Arc Productions, 2006. Film.
- Family Guy*. Fox Broadcasting Company. 1999–present. Television.
- Finding Nemo*. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Pixar Animation Studios, 2003. Film.
- Futurama*. The Curiosity Company, 1999–present. Television.
- House Party*. CBS/ABC, 1945–67. Radio.
- How to Train Your Dragon*. Dir. Chris Sanders and Dean DeBois. DreamWorks Animation, 2010. Film.
- The Incredibles*. Dir. Brad Bird. Pixar Animation Studios, 2004. Film.
- The Jetsons*. Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1962–63. Television.
- Kent, Ray. D. and Giuliana Miolo. “Phonetic Abilities in the First Year of Life” in *The Handbook of Child Language*. Eds. Paul Fletcher and Brian MacWhinney. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004. 303–34. Print.
- Kids Say the Darndest Things*. CBS, 1998–2000. Television.
- Kids Say the Funniest Things*. London Weekend Television. 1998–2000. Television.
- King of the Hill*. Deedle-Dee Productions, 1997–2005. Television.
- Krieg, Jessica. “There’s No Business Like Show Business: Child Entertainers and the Law”. *Journal of Labor and Employment Law* 6.2 (2003–04): 429–49. Print.
- Lawson, Tim, and Alisa Persons. *The Magic Behind the Voices: A Who’s Who of Cartoon Voice Actors*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2004. Print.

- Levy, Daniel B. *Animation Development: From Pitch to Production*. New York: Allworth Press, 2009. Print.
- The Little Rascals*. Hanna-Barbera Productions, 1982–84. Television.
- Linkletter, Arthur. *Kids Say the Darndest Things*. Berkley, CA: Celestial Arts, 2005. Print.
- Lury, Karen. *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairytales*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. Print.
- Lyons, Mike. "Disney's Second Golden Age". *Cinefantastique* 29.8 (1997): 39–49. Print.
- The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh*. Dir. John Lounsbery, Wolfgang Reiterman. Walt Disney Productions, 1977. Film.
- Mars Needs Moms*. Dir. Simon Wells. ImageMovers Digital, 2011. Film.
- Meet the Robinsons*. Dir. Steve Anderson. Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2007. Film.
- Megamind*. Dir. Tom McGrath. DreamWorks Animation, 2010. Film.
- Monster House*. Dir. Gil Kenan. Columbia Pictures, 2006. Film.
- Monsters, Inc.* Dir. Pete Docter. Pixar Animation Studios, 2001. Film.
- "*Monsters, Inc.* Production Notes". *Culture.com*, n.d.  
 <<http://culture.com/articles/724/monsters-inc-production-notes.phtml>> Web. 15 June 2012.
- Mulan*. Dir. Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook. Walt Disney Productions, 1998. Film.
- My Fair Lady*. Dir. George Cukor. Warner Bros, 1964. Film.
- Neuwirth, Allan. *Makin' Toons: Inside the Most Popular Animated TV Shows and Movies*. New York: Allworth Press, 2003. Print.
- O'Connor, Jane. *The Cultural Significance of the Child Star*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Oller, D. Kimbrough. *The Emergence of the Speech Capacity*. New Jersey: Taylor and Francis, 2009. Print.
- Over the Hedge*. Dir. Tim Johnson and Karey Kirkpatrick. DreamWorks Animation, 2006. Film.
- Peter Pan*. Dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske. Walt Disney Productions, 1953. Film.
- Pinker, Steven. *The Language Instinct*. New York: Morrow, 1994. Print.

- Planet 51*. Dir. Jorge Blanco. Ilion Animation Studios, 2009. Film.
- Pocahontas*. Dir. Mike Gabriel, Eric Goldberg. Walt Disney Productions, 1995. Film.
- The Polar Express*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. ImageMovers, 2004. Film.
- Rio*. Dir. Carlos Saldanha. Blue Sky Studios, 2011. Film.
- Rugrats*. Klasky-Csupo, 1991–2004. Television.
- Schulz, Charles M. *Peanuts*. United Feature Syndicate, 1950–2000. Print.
- The Simpsons*. Gracie Films, 1989–present. Television.
- Sito, Tom. *Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson*. Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2006. Print.
- South Park*. Comedy Central. 1997–present. Television.
- The Sword in the Stone*. Dir. Wolfgang Reiterman. Walt Disney Productions, 1963. Film.
- Toy Story 3*. Dir. Lee Unkrich. Pixar Animation Studios, 2010. Film.
- Up*. Dir. Pete Docter. Pixar Animation Studios, 2009. Film.
- Velarde, Robert. *The Wisdom of Pixar: An Animated Look at Virtue*. Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010. Print.
- Wall-E*. Dir. Andrew Stanton. Pixar Animation Studios, 2008. Film.
- Who Framed Roger Rabbit*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Touchstone Pictures, 1988. Film.
- The Wild Thornberrys*. Klasky-Csupo, 1998–2004. Television.
- Wreck-it Ralph*. Dir. Rich Moore. Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2012. Film.

### **Suggested Citation**

Holliday, Christopher. "Emotion Capture: Vocal Performances by Children in the Computer-Animated Film". *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 3 (Summer 2012). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

**Christopher Holliday** is a PhD candidate at King's College, London. He is currently researching and interrogating the visual codes and conventions of computer-animated films in

relation to their status as a unique genre of contemporary cinema. He is also working on issues of film acting and performance, fictional world creation and comedy within the context of traditional animation and digital media, and has given several conference papers arising from these areas of investigation.