ANCIENT ARCHETYPES
The ‘Greek Chorus’ in The Tracker’s Songs

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Abstract

Rolf de Heer’s film The Tracker (2002) is a fictional representation of period, location, characters and events but has strong echoes of historical documentation. It is, essentially, a morality play, much akin to Aesop’s fables. By not revealing character names in the film, de Heer renders the players as ancient archetypes, like the anthropomorphic animals of Aesop. The film is confronting and thought-provoking yet a number of key elements serve to disrupt a realist reading of the film: most particularly, the use of a series of songs that function like the Chorus of ancient Greek drama to compensate for the inability of the characters to interrelate on any kind of emotional level. Performed by Australian Aboriginal singer Archie Roach, the songs were written by (non-indigenous) Rolf de Heer and composer Graham Tardif. Do the songs serve as a bridge between cultures, or as a potential site for antagonism? How does the ‘Greek Chorus’ dramatic device function in the context of a contemporary Australian feature film? In attending to these questions, this paper outlines the history of the use of the device of the ‘Greek Chorus’ in cinema and investigates its application in this film.

Keywords
The Tracker, Rolf de Heer, indigenous Australian, Greek Chorus, film songs, Archie Roach

Introduction

The lineage of the ‘Greek Chorus’ in dramatic productions can be traced from ancient Greek theatre through to the contemporary use of leitmotifs in opera and film music. The particular application of the ‘Greek Chorus’ in the music of Rolf de Heer’s 2002 film The Tracker is different from common practice in contemporary Australian cinema. Rendered as a series of songs performed by renowned singer Archie Roach, the ‘Greek Chorus’ in this manifestation has an overt narrative function passing commentary on the action without intruding upon it, unlike the role of songs in a musical film. Modern drama feature films commonly employ musical underscore to convey emotions or unspoken information in an effective yet subtle way (Gorbman, 1987) and as a conduit to identification with the narrative (Kassabian, 2001). This article explores the use of the Greek Chorus as a narrative device, tracing its lineage, and comparing its implementation in this film to that of the use of leitmotif in other film scores to convey complex unspoken concepts: the sub-narrative. The Tracker uses a number of overtly contrived narrative devices, including the use of Greek Chorus in the musical score. The article illustrates how
this device has the potential to heighten our emotional engagement with a fictional narrative.

Establishing the Music for The Tracker

Rolf de Heer first conceived the story for The Tracker in 1992, ten years prior to its final release:

An idea for [the] film formed in my head, an angry film, a story of three white men and a black tracker in the middle of nowhere, hunting down a fugitive. The film would be a philosophical discourse between the white men, as they argued the black and white ethics of the time while tracking deeper and deeper into hostile territory, committing the sorts of acts I'd read about. (De Heer, 2007: 5)

In 1992, researching the history of interactions between the Indigenous population and the colonisers as background for another film, De Heer was alarmed at what he found:

I did learn that the history of white colonisation of Australia was a much more troubled one than the history I'd learnt at school. The violence inflicted upon the Indigenous population was at times extreme, and certainly widespread. It was a deeply shocking contradiction to the comic book version taught in schools in the early sixties. (ibid)

De Heer proceeded to craft a story, set in early twentieth century Australian outback, of three white men and an Aboriginal tracker (played by acclaimed indigenous actor, David Gulpilil) attempting to locate an Aboriginal man who has been accused of murdering a white woman. The central white characters, led by a racist colonial policeman, engage in some horrific acts of violence. All characters are identified only by archetypal names in the closing credits: The Fugitive (Noel Wilton), The Tracker (Gulpilil), The Fanatic (Gary Sweet), The Follower (Damon Gameau) and The Veteran (Grant Page). Thus, as external observers, we are kept at a distance from the characters. While basing the narrative on character archetypes, De Heer allows space for their development through the narrative and especially in response to the violent acts they engage in.

The setting for The Tracker is indeterminate. The clothing of the characters and the music score for the film are inconsistent with the year 1922, the given time of the events, and we are not told the exact place where the story occurs. Although the events of the film are fictional and the presented characters archetypal, De Heer intimated in conversation that the character of The Fanatic was modeled on that of Constable William Willshire, active in the Northern Territory in the 1890s, who dealt out large measures of self-determined justice to local Aboriginal people, conducting many atrocities similar to events depicted in The Tracker (Perkins and Nowra, 2008).

In order to lessen the negative impact of the violence that he envisaged in the story, De Heer considered counterpointing the harder edges of the film with the use of “jaunty Country ‘n’ Western songs” (De Heer, 2007: 7). Reaching a dead-end in the

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1 For more analysis of the film, see several critical and scholarly articles, including Probyn (2005), Sharp (2003) and Smaill (2002).
progression of the script, De Heer left it to work on other projects. The idea was revived as a proposal to feature in the Adelaide Festival of Arts of 2002 but De Heer was required to position the film as a piece of cinema in the context of a performing arts festival:

*How do you play a piece of cinema and give it relevance within an Arts Festival context... where you have all this theatre and live performance stuff?... And so, I talked to them about doing a live performance of it, which then became a contractual necessity... Because there was this agreement to have a band and songs, we developed it until it did work.*

To suit the (perceived) needs of the Adelaide Festival of Arts, De Heer set a primary condition that the music involve live performance for the film’s premiere in the Festival. During the production process, the composer Graham Tardif and De Heer together explored a number of alternative approaches to scoring. A solution had still not been found by the time shooting was completed. The original conception, the ‘jaunty Country n’ Western songs’, was found to be anempathetic to the mood of the film. As an experiment, De Heer tried sections of the CD *Buried Country*, the soundtrack of a documentary produced by Andy Nehl in 2000 detailing the history of Aboriginal popular music, with a particular focus on the genre of ‘Country’.

*The first time we put something up and realised it was going to work was when we had a clear Indigenous voice—and then it attached itself immediately to the character of the Tracker. That’s when we realised that we had to have an Indigenous singer.*

In a ‘Q & A’ session with the director at a screening of the film in January 2011, De Heer described the use of a ‘gravelly campfire voice’ from *Buried Country*. Unsuccessful attempts were made to match the (unidentified) singer to the film: while he had an appropriate vocal quality, the singer was unable to match his performance to the practical necessity of a click-track. It was then that an approach was made to Archie Roach, a singer/songwriter with an intensely soulful, rich voice appropriate for carrying the emotion of the film and with many years recording experience.

The music for the film developed as ten songs with a number of linking instrumental cues, mostly derived from the songs, used to link scenes and transport the spectator through several montage sequences. Tardif composed the music threaded through the film, while the song lyrics were written by De Heer. Tardif had collaborated on several of De Heer’s previous films. To aid him in the writing of the lyrics for *The Tracker*, Tardif supplied De Heer with a recording of the computer-sequenced music with the vocal line played by a keyboard instrument. De Heer then wrote the lyrics to suit.

Archie Roach played a crucial role in transforming the lyrics to the highly emotive performances heard in the film soundtrack. De Heer describes the recording process:

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2 All quotes from Rolf de Heer, unless otherwise cited, are extracted from an interview with De Heer conducted by the author, 20th August 2009, by Skype.
The great Aboriginal singer Archie Roach was asked to sing them, and seeing the film (without the words to the songs, which had not yet been written), he readily agreed. Some months later we spent a week recording Archie and the musicians, and during a break in the recording (a very emotional time for Archie), he and I were sitting outside having a quiet cigarette. He looked at me several times, then asked a question...”Did you write those words?” I said that I had indeed written the words to the songs. A piercing stare from Archie... “All of them?”. I nodded. He shook his head in some sort of disbelief, then said, “You and I have traveled very different roads, but we’ve arrived at the same place”. (De Heer, 2007: 7)

There can be little doubt that Archie’s own life experiences as a member of the ‘stolen generation’ who was raised in orphanages and foster homes, and survived periods of alcoholism and living as an itinerate musician, inform his performances in the songs of the film. His voice, featuring heavy tremolo and bass resonances like anguished sobs, seems to tell the story of his own struggles, and his personal engagement with the content of the lyrics is evident in the performances.

To allow live performance with the film, Tardif assembled a modest ensemble of five instrumentalists to accompany Archie Roach, with musicians on slide dobro guitar, acoustic and electric guitars, organ/synthesizer, electric bass, and drums. While the musical score was performed live for the opening night of the Adelaide Festival of Arts on 2nd March, 2002, the cost of staging such performances—plus the complications of synchronising performance to a complicated variable click track—precluded the possibility of a large number of performed screenings. To date, the film has had only one other live performance: on 23rd July 2002 at the opening night of the Melbourne International Film Festival. De Heer had planned a third performance that was to be in the USA, but it became logistically impractical and the idea was abandoned.

The music accompanying the version of the film screened in cinemas, international film festivals and released on DVD closely resembles these live performances (with some additional multi-tracking and mixing). The sparse instrumentation used is typical of Tardif’s scores for De Heer’s films. Of the ten feature films that Tardif has scored for De Heer (out of twelve De Heer films to date), only one—The Old Man Who Read Love Stories (2001), a relatively generously-funded international co-production—has used a large instrumental ensemble.

While the music of The Tracker cannot be tied easily to any particular time period, both the mood and the instrumentation are decidedly not of the specified year of the story, 1922. For the most part, the music is simple, pensive and mellow with the primary function of transporting the lyrics, without subsuming them.

There are long periods in the film without dialogue, both as a result of the characters’ inability to interact in other than superficial ways, and because the characters move through wild country under the constant fear of attack from ‘those

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4 A term used to describe indigenous children (mostly mixed race) who, in the period from 1870s to 1970s, were forcibly removed by Australian federal and state government agencies from their families to be raised by church missions, orphanages or foster families in a policy aimed at diluting the indigenous cultural influence. Alec Morgan’s 1983 documentary Lousy Little Sixpence, and Philip Noyce’s feature film Rabbit-Proof Fence are just two screen representations of ‘stolen generation’ stories.

5 The musicians credited in the cinema/DVD release of the film were Martin Boyd (keyboard), Steve Salvi (guitar and Dobro) Julian Barnett (guitars), Andy Salvanos (bass) and Craig Lauritsen (drums).
damned bush blacks’. This allows the songs to tell aspects of the story that the
characters are incapable of articulating without intruding into the temporal flow of
the narrative, while the instrumental music serves to aid the flow of montage
sequences that indicate the passing of time or distance. Like the ‘Greek Chorus’,
each song is inserted into the narrative either as a commentary on the action we
see, or as reflection of underlying feelings. They function non-diegetically, in that
the characters do not hear or respond to the voice and the songs operate for our
benefit, as spectators of the tableau vivant.

Although limited to a small ensemble, the music adopts several emotional moods
and is able to express viewpoints through variation of style and instrumentation.
Sustained low chords with or without voice are used to evoke solemnity, fearfulness
or sacredness. Slide dobro guitar recalls Ry Cooder’s work in *Paris, Texas* (dir: Wim
Wenders, 1984). However, whereas Cooder’s use of the instrument paints a sonic
image of an empty sprawling landscape, the landscapes here are packed full of
detail. Filmed in the Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary in the Flinders Ranges of
South Australia, the locations range from rugged spectacular ridge tops to steep-
walled gullies—there are no wide empty plains here as we are used to seeing in
Australian ‘quest’ (or ‘road’) movies. Unaccompanied dobro guitar is used at various
times to give an acoustic highlight to ‘reveals’, where the camera zooms in to an
object usually visible only to The Tracker. Slightly distorted organ with bass,
electric guitar and drums played in slow triple time common in some styles of
gospel music is used to represent oppression. Strong driving snare drum rhythms
are used to express anger. Some songs reoccur with different lyrics and there is
increasing use of an Aboriginal language to express anguish through the
progression of the narrative.

Early in the film, The Tracker sees smoke rising from behind a distant ridge and
announces “Plenty big trouble coming!” Slow organ in a gospel-like feel begins, and
the song that follows indicates to the spectator that the trouble will in fact come
from within the party:

> Bad times ahead, trouble coming
> What am I doing here? Waiting.
> Have to face up to them, someone like me
> Who must carry the burden alone.
> What am I doing here? Waiting to strike.
> Waiting only until the right time
> Bad times ahead.7

The music sounds solemn, even devotional. This is the first indication that The
Tracker is the character who is really controlling the destiny of the party.

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6 De Heer chose not to open *The Tracker* with a conventional title sequence, instead presenting a landscape painting,
frozen in time, which slowly transforms into the filmed landscape alive with shimmering heat. This is the first of a series of
paintings used at points of transition, often occasioned by moments of extreme violence in the story. Filmed images are
replaced by paintings in a simple, naive style by South Australian artist Peter Coad, who traveled with the company creating
his images on set to ensure that the view and the light was the same as for the camera. De Heer took this radical approach
not out of a desire for novelty but to subvert the increasingly graphic nature of violence he saw in contemporary film. To
feature such graphic images he felt would only serve to lessen the impact of the film, and adversely limit the potential
audience.

7 Lyrics reprinted with permission by Rolf De Heer for Vertigo Productions. All subsequent lyrics also covered by this
permission.
The party storms a group of Aboriginal people, one wearing a trooper's uniform, and as the two white policeman chain and humiliate the group, The Tracker stands aside and we hear a short verse:

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\begin{align*}
\text{In this land long ago, we lived our own way} \\
\text{Ninyamoni yanguenei} \\
\text{Now we're no longer free, we are dispossessed} \\
\text{Nangale withakenye} \\
\text{Nangangalele, people of mine}^8
\end{align*}
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The music starts in the same devotional tone as before, but as the actions of the policeman become more and more degrading, the feel of the music changes, gathering rhythmic momentum, and an increasing amount of Aboriginal language is heard in the lyrics. As firearms are brought into play, we hear a strong snare rhythm and rock-type organ riff. The song is dramatically cut-off by the sound of gunshots, as the policemen massacre the group. Thus the music anticipates the growing anguish felt by either the group or The Tracker and the abrupt music cut suggests that even The Tracker did not expect the severity of the massacre that ensued. This heightens the shock of the action for the spectator. We are spared the sight of the implied graphic violence by the use of paintings ‘interpreting’ the violence.

As the sun rises to reveal the hanging body of the leader of the party (The Fanatic), executed by The Tracker for his crimes against innocent people, we hear the bittersweet triumph of a slow shuffle beat in a verse-chorus song configuration. This neatly encapsulates the demands for a Government apology to the Indigenous people of Australia that were heard in the Australian community at the time of the film’s production. The song also touches on the then-Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard’s, preoccupation with the teaching of colonial history:

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\begin{align*}
\text{You have taken my country,} \\
\text{Fought me, killed me, exterminated by your hand.} \\
\text{I have lost all my being,} \\
\text{Empty, derided, forsaken in what was my land} \\
\text{And I can never return until there’s contrition} \\
\text{And we can all read my history.} \\
\text{I still long for my country,} \\
\text{I still remember the spirit that lives in my land.} \\
\text{But I can only forgive when there is contrition,} \\
\text{And we at last face my history.} \\
\text{And so I will only forgive when there is contrition,} \\
\text{And I can face proud my history.}
\end{align*}
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The songs throughout generally give us a sense that The Tracker considers he is taking on responsibility for righting wrongs on behalf of ‘my people’, and this is

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^8 All examples of Aboriginal language given in the paper are phonetic representations of Archie Roach’s performance.
established from very early in the film, before we have seen much evidence of the
depths to which the leader of the party can sink.

Reviewing the soundtrack CD in the online magazine Urban Cinefile, Brad Green observed:

>Movingly elegiac, there is not nearly so much ire here as lament. These are beautiful sounds that echo ugly truths. Roach’s greatest achievement is to emote with the stately solemnity of a man standing on a cliff top, surveying a landscape that hardly changes, while all the while bearing witness to tumultuous vicissitudes of human history. It is an earthy, poignant experience for the listener, and as cathartic and poignant as the American blues. (Green, 2002: online)

The reference to American blues is certainly warranted. Like that style, the songs of The Tracker place powerful lyrics with emotional delivery over slow, mellow musical feels. However, none of the songs use standard blues structures. De Heer has stated that the songs were intended to serve primarily as cinematic underscore, and indeed the songs are moulded to shape around the narrative of the film rather than conforming to standard song structures. As a consequence, although the soundtrack CD lists ten vocal songs, a couple of the songs are segmented into distinct sections.

The song with the strongest leanings to a standard structure is ‘All Men Choose the Path They Walk’, which uses a common ballad harmonic/melodic structure A A B A of sixteen bars duration, with the final A section carrying the title as a ‘refrain’. However, there is no consistent rhyming pattern and no repeated lines within each verse, a common feature in the blues. The songs in the film therefore might be intended to hint at blues styles without direct use of their most obvious structures. Although the use of dobro and organ particularly reference popular music styles of southern USA, Archie Roach’s voice is recognisably Australian Aboriginal in pronunciation and phrasing.

Voicing the Narrative

Central to our perception of sound is the human voice, both in life and in the acousmatic dimension of film. Michel Chion articulates the ‘vococentrism’ of our reception of film sound thus:

> *In actual movies, for real spectators, there are not all the sounds including the human voice. There are voices, and then everything else. In other words, in every audio mix, the presence of a human voice instantly sets up a hierarchy of perception . . . the presence of a human voice structures the sonic space that contains it.* (Chion, 1999: 5)

The voice therefore occupies a primary focus in the narrative of a film. Chion defines the ‘acousmêtre’ of a film—an unseen character whose voice implies their immanence, or unseen presence, within the mise en scène (Chion, 1994: 129). The presence of a disembodied voice makes us consider its source. Is this voice the internal dialogue of an onscreen character, or a separate individual? Is the voice speaking/singing within or external to the temporal flow of the narrative? For the

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9 This was used as a tagline in marketing materials for promotion of the film.
voice as the disembodied internal dialogue of one of the on-screen characters, Chion defines the term “I-voice” (Chion, 1999: 49).

In this film, we perceive by inference an attachment of the voice of the narrator/singer to the character of The Tracker through references in the song lyrics to ‘my people’ accompanying images of Aboriginal people. Of course, the voice is that of Archie Roach, and not that of David Gulpilil, the actor playing the character. For most spectators, the songs assume the role of reflective narrator most likely in the first-person voice of the Tracker. However, this “I-voice” interpretation is disrupted by the seemingly external observation of the Tracker’s character in “All Men Choose the Path They Walk”. For this song, the camera holds our gaze on each character for an entire verse as they travel—the external observer of the ‘Greek Chorus’ providing a ‘score sheet’ comparing the natures of each character:

(The Fugitive)
Some men are prone to misadventure, questions of guilt aren’t always clear
Some men run from a fate they can’t avoid, all men choose the path they walk

(The Veteran)
Some can’t be faulted for their reason, failing to justly intervene
Some men hide from the memories that haunt, all men choose the path they walk

(The Follower)
Some men see everything through duty, cast off responsibility
Some regret that their courage sometimes fails, all men choose the path they walk

(The Fanatic)
Some men have attitude that’s righteous, care not about the consequence
Some men fight with the violence inside, all men choose the path they walk

(The Tracker)
Some men have reached their destination, finding their own serenity
Some men lead others till they recognise, that all men choose the path they walk.

We cannot be sure if the narrator’s voice (sung) is located in the temporal flow of the narrative (as if the Tracker were singing to himself), or part of a retelling of the story. A retelling narrative film would usually be framed by seeing the storyteller at the beginning and end of the film, such as De Heer used in an earlier film Epsilon (1997), or indeed is commonly used in many children’s stories. However, if the film were to clearly identify the sung narration with the character of The Tracker, it might become clear to the audience too early in the film that in fact he will be one of the surviving characters by virtue of the retrospective reflection that the songs might imply, thus deflating the primary focus of uncertainty in the narrative. One of the primary generators of tension that De Heer uses in the narrative is the uncertainty about which character(s) will survive the ordeal.

While The Tracker is not the first film to use songs to serve the function of a ‘Greek Chorus’ within a film, it is an uncommon narrative technique in the context of contemporary Australian feature film, and especially those telling Indigenous stories. Non-Australian examples include Cat Ballou (Elliot Silverstein, 1965) with
Nat ‘King’ Cole and Stubby Kaye as on-screen minstrels, and Woody Allen’s *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995) in which a Greek Chorus is a literal and constant interpreter of events both in spoken declamation and in song (and, finally, in dance as well!). Yet the device remains a rarity, and is a diegetic construct necessary in this film to compensate for the lack of ability of the characters to effectively emote.

Another setting of songs in a film might draw the label ‘musical’ or ‘screen opera’. Two such examples, both by the director Rachel Perkins, are *One Night the Moon* (2001) and the screen version of the Jimmy Chi stage musical *Bran Nue Dae* (2009). *One Night the Moon*, based around a series of songs and musical pieces written by singers Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody and composer Mairead Hannan, features Paul Kelly, his (then) wife and daughter as principal actors, and presents as an extended ‘music video’ (see Winchester, 2005). The pacing of the drama and editing of the film is structured around the songs. Dialogue is minimal with the narrative driven primarily by the songs sung by the principal actors accompanied by instruments that we, for the most part, do not see. The film’s ability to emotionally engage the audience is limited by the awareness of the artificial miming of the songs onscreen by the actors, the stylized and slow-paced acting, and the structural restrictions placed on the narrative flow by the use of standard song-forms. The more recent example, *Bran Nue Dae*, is widely marketed as a comedy musical. There is some music played within the mise en scène but the majority of singing and dancing in the film is performed without the accompaniment of visible instruments. How do we perceive the artificial attachment of the voice to the character in a movie? Chion comments:

... why should we care at all about jerry-rigging, nailing-down, dubbing, synch sound, playback or ventriloquism? Well sometimes it matters and sometimes not. In the burlesque strain of film comedy... nothing ontological is at stake. These films often play on the very situation of the human being as a dislocated body, a puppet, a burlesque assemblage of body and voice. If we stop believing for a moment in the unity of the body with the voice, it is “serious” dramatic movies whose effect is more readily threatened. (Chion, 1999: 131-2).

*Bran Nue Dae* accommodates the artificial process of miming of the songs because of different expectations for the audience in the comedy musical genre, emphasised in this case by highly exaggerated characterisations and farcical situations.

For both of these movies, and for the genre of the musical in general, the songs are the starting point in the narrative from which all other aspects of the film derive. The songs in *The Tracker* serve a quite different function.

The ‘Greek Chorus’ in Opera and Film Music

There is some disagreement on the exact function of the Chorus in ancient Greek theatre. In writing for the stage, each poet/dramatist would use the Chorus in different ways. However, for the purposes of this discussion it is reasonable to generalise on our contemporary perception of the Chorus as a group of singers/dancers functioning as one of the characters, commenting on the drama and interacting to some extent with the other players (Weiner, 1980: 205). The opening of Woody Allen’s *Mighty Aphrodite* is a pseudo-authentic historical presentation of the Greek Chorus in its historical and dramatic context.
The musical genre of opera, invented by the ‘Camerata de’ Bardi’ of late 16th century Florence, was predicated on the belief that the ancient Greek dramas had been sung throughout. In realising a musical drama, recitativo (for which the singer adopts common speech rhythms) was invented as a means to accommodate narrative flow, otherwise encumbered by being forced to conform to existing quadratic musical structures such as dance forms, thus creating a dichotomy between the rhythmically free recitativo and the other more rigid forms. The modern musical, either for stage or screen, is derived from this early opera, with recitativo more or less in evidence between songs and dances in regular structures.

In Wagnerian opera, the function of the Greek Chorus was absorbed into the musical structure of the drama through the use of leitmotifs. The libretto of the opera (often employing poetic linguistic devices) served to tell the outward aspects of the story, whereas the use of musical leitmotifs allowed for an external observer or the inner voice of the characters to ‘comment’ on events and convey unspoken meaning in a form of sub-narrative. Thus, text and music were free to adopt complementary roles in the narrative process.

This development in opera, using the interplay of themes for the conveyance of a sub-narrative, occurred almost coincidentally with the development of moving pictures, toward the end of the nineteenth century. Soon after the broad introduction of synchronised cinema sound technology in the late 1920s, film music composers turned to nineteenth century opera as a desirable model for the application of music in film allowing for emotional or hidden information to be conveyed economically and with subtlety. From the early 1930s and particularly evident in the scores of Hollywood studio film composers such as Max Steiner, the use of leitmotifs was adopted as an effective technique for creating a musical setting for film, using musical themes to represent characters, objects, places or emotions and thereby allowing the music to assist narrative unity (Gorbman, 1987: 90). Other techniques have since been employed in the creation of a music score for a film (Prendergast, 1992: 231) including the use of songs, however the use of leitmotifs and thematic variation have continued as commonly employed compositional techniques. The use of instrumental leitmotifs presumes the ability for music to represent extra-musical factors: people, objects, places, emotions and situations (as well as change over time) outside of the boundaries of the music itself. For music to effectively signify non-musical elements in a drama requires the establishment of a system of reference.

In composing for opera or for film, the composer can utilise both extant musical cultural signifiers, from within or without a culture, or newly composed themes created to function within the enclosed world of the opera or film. The establishment of a system of reference for newly composed themes is achieved by association and repetition. With sufficient repetition of a musical theme within an enclosed self-referential system, the ‘hidden’ meaning can be conveyed at a subconscious level. Wagner’s large-scale operas achieved this to some extent through their extended duration and, in the case of the tetralogy commonly referred to as The Ring, through a consistency of use across operas. Within the scope of a dramatic film, there is both less time available to establish this self-contained system of signifiers, and less conscious attention paid to their reception because of the subordination of sound to image in the conscious perception of a film.

A film composer rarely has the opportunity to make the narrative of the film conform to quadratic musical structures or consistent time intervals, such as is
heard in early opera. Music in a film is most usually rendered as short gestures to avoid overwhelming or ‘constructing’ the narrative (Brown, 1994: 154). Longer musical structures in a score are still usually reserved for extended sequences without dialogue, such as in montage, scene transitions, and the opening and closing credits of a film.

We have seen how the music for opera or for film can comprise newly composed themes or extant cultural materials, real or contrived. The effectiveness of engagement of the audience with these resources will depend upon the extent to which association of the signifier to the signified has been established through repetition. Extant cultural materials may offer an intertextual association but, where the signification process is dependent on cultural experience of the individual spectator, can suffer from cultural ambiguities. Much less ambiguous, but still far from perfect, is spoken or sung text, with meaning imbued in the performance, the music and the text itself. Intended meanings can be strongly conveyed via songs specifically composed for a screenplay, as is the case with The Tracker. Nevertheless, issues of authorship require consideration.

Text as a Site of Conflict

The fact that the song lyrics for The Tracker were written by (Dutch-Australian) De Heer has been a site of conflict for some commentators, who have questioned the propriety of having such emotional words sung by an Aboriginal person (De Heer, 2007: 7). But De Heer explains how the song texts were integral to his screenplay:

... in the writing of the words, I had to do it because the words were going to affect how one reads the film—I couldn’t begin to think of letting somebody else write them because they had such an intimate relationship with the storytelling of the film.

In fact, when asked in a radio interview how he felt singing songs written by a ‘whitefella’, Archie Roach defended the process, stating firmly ”They’re MY words, those words belong to MY people!” (De Heer, 2007: 8). It is clear that Roach felt very strongly that the words and the music were appropriate to the story. This of itself is not a defence of De Heer’s presumptive actions, and, as far back as 1993, Marcia Langton warned against considering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as speaking with one voice, and against making:

... the assumption of the undifferentiated ‘Other’. More specifically, the assumption... that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preference, and so on. (Langton, 1993: 27)

However, up to 2002 when The Tracker was produced, no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person had had the opportunity to relate the early colonial experience from an indigenous perspective in a feature-length film. De Heer’s film reveals a part of Australia’s indigenous and settler mutual history, expressed as a uniquely powerful narrative that at the time was little acknowledged by the wider community. This film has carried the message to substantial audiences mainly within Australia.10 More recently, Rachel Perkins and SBS11 produced the First

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10 The film grossed almost AUD$800k by March 2003 but also was recognized through several Australian and international film awards, including a Screen Music Award to Tardif and De Heer for the song Far Away Home.
Australians documentary series (2008) giving an eye-opening account of the first two hundred years of European and Indigenous interaction in Australia. These films and others like them have an important role to play in changing perceptions, and music and songs can assist in such a project.

Language in The Tracker Narrative

Although Aboriginal language is used at points throughout The Tracker, Gulpilil’s character makes it clear quite early in the film that there is no universal Aboriginal language, that the people of one area cannot necessarily understand the speech of those from another area. When Aboriginal language is used, at no point are we given the support of translated subtitles although meaning is discernable via the film context.

Figure 1: The Tracker played by David Gulpilil (Image courtesy of Vertigo Productions)

For non-speakers of an Aboriginal language, there is no conflict implicit in the use of language, per se. However, speakers of Aboriginal languages might have cause to wonder who is represented by the use of language in the dialogue and in the songs. Is it The Tracker, The Fugitive, the various groups of ‘bush blacks’ that we see, or the voice of the ‘Chorus’, Archie Roach? As the location of the action in the film is indeterminate, perhaps we do not need to know. De Heer notes the language used in the songs is Bundjalung, a language from the far northeast corner of New South Wales, the language of Archie’s father. The words were written by De Heer and translated into Bundjalung by Archie Roach, Michael Walker and Michelle Torrens.

Language is used as a statement of power within the narrative. When The Tracker pretends not to understand an instruction from the leader of the tracking party, The Fanatic grabs the youngest of the tracking party and declares, “This man, for a white man, displays a particularly low level of intelligence, yet he understands what I say BECAUSE he is a white man.” The Fanatic also attempts to assert his

11 Special Broadcasting Service, the multi-lingual television (and radio) service for multicultural Australia.
12 Personal communication with director, 13th September 2009.
authority over The Tracker through (limited) use of Aboriginal words. Later, it is revealed that, not only does The Tracker speak English and at least two different Aboriginal languages, he speaks Latin as well! Language holds an elevated status of importance within the narrative, and thus consideration of the actual languages used in both dialogue and songs is not particularly significant. Indeed, The Tracker’s role in the narrative as both a servant of the whitefellas ostensibly assisting in the search for The Fugitive but sympathetic to the Indigenous peoples makes him an archetypal ‘everyman’, and this is conveyed with the mixture of languages in song and dialogue.

The voice of Archie Roach is recognisable, particularly for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander audiences, and even though he is never seen on screen, his singing style is easily identifiable. Many Aboriginal people are aware of Roach’s own history as one of the ‘stolen generation’ (Roach, undated). Additionally, David Gulpilil’s upbringing as a traditional Yolŋu man from East Arnhem Land is well known to many Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (Gulpilil, undated). Rather than this knowledge compromising the ‘suspension of disbelief’ required for engagement with the narrative, it offers an additional level of meaning to the film.

Conclusions

The use of a sung narration in a film score can be seen to derive from the Chorus, as seen in ancient Greek theatre. A comparative history reveals the more common technique of the instrumental leitmotif to derive from the same source. The inclusion of songs in The Tracker as a principle vehicle of unspoken communication is an unusual narrative technique, particularly in the context of contemporary Australian cinema. However, it is but one of several innovations that De Heer has employed in this film to create a work of fiction with a powerful, lasting emotive effect. Brad Green’s review highlights how the choice of the particular voice of Archie Roach positions the songs from the viewpoint of an external observer, standing at a distance from the story. Positioned in this way, the songs, functioning as a ‘Greek Chorus’ or hidden narrator, are able to guide the viewer through the film by observing and interpreting events from an Aboriginal perspective, that of The Tracker himself.

The Tracker uses several techniques—landscape paintings, archetypal characters, the lack of a specific time and place for the action—to reinforce that the film does not present a true story. The use of a sung narration is another, powerful technique to reinforce this fictional construct. Yet while De Heer’s innovative elements would appear to work against a reading of this film as a retelling of historical fact, this does not appear to affect the emotive power that the film commands. Much of this emotive power results from its soundtrack: Archie Roach’s rich and expressive voice, Graham Tardif’s aptly chosen sparse instrumentation and musical arrangements, and Rolf De Heer’s effective lyrics. The message is not subtle, as the subject matter demands. The use of sung narration leaves little room for misinterpretation of the underlying message.

As the final credits roll, De Heer issues a call for the audience to engage in the process of reconciliation with the indigenous people of Australia, through the lyrics of the final song:

*Hope’s all we have, until we find a way,*

*For all around to respect what we say.*
Blood and land, it’s not our shame,
Chain our hands, take our lands,
We stay.

That’s where our future goes, searching for those
Who will carry the burden with us.
Always, we hope.

By engaging the emotions of the audience, De Heer attempts to engage them more actively in the process of reconciliation for past wrongs in Australian post-colonial society. In that regard, the use of the ‘Greek Chorus’ narrative device in The Tracker music has addressed the overarching aims of the director, mobilising a philosophical discourse on race relations and performing this function in an effective (and affective) way. The music in this film raises potential issues of authorship and appropriation, and has been a site of conflict. In The Tracker the primary use of songs to serve as a ‘Greek Chorus’ has proven to be an effective tool for emotional engagement. De Heer has eschewed any attempt to objectively portray a true story; rather, The Tracker employs music interwoven in the narrative to not only entertain, but also to inform and, ultimately perhaps, to change opinions.

Bibliography