ALL MASHED UP?
Songs, Music and Allusionism in *The Loved Ones* (2009)

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Abstract

This article considers Australian director Sean Byrne’s 2009 horror/comedy feature film *The Loved Ones* with particular regard to its uses of allusionism within a popular genre context. Within this focus, the article explores the various musical components of the soundtrack (including critical use of specific songs), the creative template determined by the director and the creative input and decision making of various members of the production team. In this manner, the article profiles the film’s audio-visual text, the perceptions and motivations of the production team and considers how these relate to the film’s reception and box-office performance.

Keywords

*The Loved Ones*, allusionism, film songs, soundtrack, Australian film

Allusionism — An Introduction

Back in 1982 the film theorist Noel Carroll considered and, it is not unfair to say, fretted over, the prevalence of allusionism in a range of popular films. Carroll’s critical persona and aesthetic approach drew on two strands: the auteur school of film criticism that attempted to identify distinguished creative authors working within the (supposedly largely undistinguished) mainstream film industry; and a parallel interest in and commitment to the modernism of the western cinematic avant-garde. His anxiety over allusionism in popular cinema arose from a position that considered that, while classic auteur cinema and (successful) modernist works could be identified to have allusionism skillfully woven into the fabric of their texts (and, more broadly, into their author’s aesthetic visions), a range of popular cultural texts seemed increasingly inclined to simply display their allusionism without any deep or thematically significant intent. Carroll’s essay is of particular historical interest as it was published shortly before the rapid rise and proliferation of theories about the Postmodern nature of a range of popular media texts and of their uses of pastiche (so called ‘blank parody’) and bricolage (a ‘grab bag’ of imitation and allusion deemed quite different in tone and purpose from modernist

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1 Given the film’s pronounced musicality, Australian viewers with a knowledge of national popular music history might perceive an allusion in the film’s title to 1960s’ Australian band The Loved Ones and their signature song, *The Loved One* (1966) – also covered by INXS in 2001. However the director has identified that no connection was intended (interview with the author March 2011).
One of Carroll’s concerns was the lack of any apparent purpose in the allusionism evident in a range of popular films targeted at what he regarded as an (implicitly) banal youthful audience. His concerns were with both the nature of authorial purpose in this (i.e. why [on Earth...] did the directors bother to insert such allusions?) and textual effect (i.e. how did these function?). But however serious they were, Carroll’s questions paled in relevance with the establishment of a Postmodern orthodoxy later in the decade that positively reveled in the ‘free slide of signifiers’ and surface textual properties of *bricolage*.

The hot moment of Postmodernism has long passed, and far fewer critical essays or popular media reviews refer to Postmodernity than in its fashionable heyday. While this is somewhat of a relief, in many ways, it also begs questions about the function of allusionism in popular cultural texts after the hot ‘moment’ of Postmodernism in essentially similar terms to those of Carroll’s original essay. It also continues to point to a somewhat schismatic relationship between textual complexity and allusion, and the genre characteristics necessary to ensure success with target audiences. In short, there are questions concerning the relationships between texts and audiences/reception and, concomitant with that, of the potential misfit between formal critical responses and audience engagement. Terms and discourse have changed in the years since Carroll first expressed his unease. In the contemporary moment, the term ‘mash-up’ is more likely to be deployed than *collage* or *bricolage* but, as discussed below, there are ambiguities to the term/concept; and its use often refers to earlier inter-textual referencing practices as much as anything radically new.

‘Wolf Creek meets Pretty in Pink’

One publicity tag used to promote *The Loved Ones* was ‘Wolf Creek meets *Pretty in Pink*’. This tag is interesting on several levels. The first reference, to Greg McLean’s internationally successful Australian horror movie (2005), identifies one set of thematic associations that would be accessible to the younger adult audience the film was targeted at. The second is a more nostalgic/film historical reference of less certain relevance for *The Loved Ones*’ target audience, Howard Deutch’s 1986 teen drama, written by John Hughes and starring iconic 1980s actress Molly Ringwald. The tagline itself has a history, as Byrne explained in a 2010 interview:

*In terms of the Pretty in Pink comparison, I’ve got to give Colin Geddes (Programmer at Toronto International Film Festival) credit for that one. He coined the phrase, “A mash up of Pretty in Pink and Misery”.* (in Whale, 2010: online)

One of the interesting aspects of this characterisation is that it is itself allusionistic rather than accurate. The term ‘mash-up’ is relatively recent and has not been solidly defined by either dictionaries or consistent patterns of use. The term is commonly used to describe a variety of textual practices that combine two or more different texts, most commonly in music, video or web design but also in other media such as cinema. In musical terms, it mostly refers to either the combination of two (or more) musical ‘backing tracks’ underneath a single vocal track or else a

2 See UK journal Screen’s mid-1980s address to these media texts and techniques in their special issue on Postmodernism v28 n2) and Jameson (1991).

3 See Collins’ (1989) address to this.
more complex collage of musical pieces. In audio-visual media, the term often refers to phenomena such as the collaging of images over a single music track or the collaging of musical sources and images to make a new composite. Applied allusionistically to cinema, it usually refers to films that clearly reference elements of previous films rather than actual textual ‘mash-ups’ that use ‘found footage’ as their central material.⁴

Geddes’s original characterisation of *The Loved Ones* as a direct combination of two specific referent texts is tendentious given the film’s affinity with and elements of similarity to *Wolf Creek* (which substituted *Misery* [1990, Rob Reiner] in the film’s final tagline) and a number of US Horror films. As Byrne himself has identified, again using the term ‘mash up’ allusionistically to describe a combination of influences and allusions:

> I did think about John Hughes in terms of the set up and using archetypes in a similar way to The Breakfast Club. There’s the rebel, the stoner, the girl next door, the goth, the wallflower etc. I wanted to make sure we covered a lot of personalities so there would be a good chance different personalities in the audience could see themselves on screen... My filmic influences were a real mash up. Structurally the film is closest to *Misery* but tonally there are shades of *Carrie*, Dazed and Confused, Footloose, The Terminator, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Evil Dead, Portrait of a Serial Killer, David Lynch, Gaspar Noë, Michael Haneke, John Hughes and even Walt Disney. The way Tarantino juxtaposes violence and comedy was a big influence. (ibid)

Byrne went on to identify his uses of these “set-ups” and models in his creative process in the following manner:

> I wasn’t a slave to these influences as I was developing and making the film. They’re films and filmmakers I really admire. I naturally responded to the work, which then no doubt subconsciously influenced my choices, but when I was writing I really let my mind roam free based on the research I’d done so the characters had a voice of their own... However, conceptually, I must admit to thinking, “What if I took the rituals of the prom – the dress up and the crowning of the King and Queen like in *Carrie* – and moved the prom to a single location like in *Evil Dead*, making the rituals of the Prom the very instrument of torture?” (ibid)

Returning to my previous discussion of Carroll, Byrne has specifically identified the role and purpose of his allusionism and its limits, stating, “Audiences may recognize some of the influences, which is half the fun, but hopefully the film, as a whole, will be a fresh experience” (ibid).

The film’s narrative is relatively straightforward. Its central storyline involves Brent (Xavier Samuel) a final-year high school student being kidnapped by a female classmate Lola (Robin McLeavy) and her doting psychotic father (John Brumpton) after Brent rejects her offer to accompany him to the end-of-year dance. The main body of the film cuts between Brent’s incarceration and torment at the hands of Lola and her father, and the actions of his girlfriend Holly (Victoria Thaine) and classmates as they prepare for the school function, unaware of his plight. In the

⁴ Such as Mike Davies’s *Sex Galaxy* (2010), for instance, which combines scenes from a plethora of vintage Sci-Fi movies to produce a narrative (of sorts) about erotic alien encounters.
The scenes at Lola’s remote family house evoke a variety of horror films and particularly *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) in the representation of a deranged murderous family and, in particular, in the prolonged kitchen scene during which Brent is tormented and tortured. The trials and tribulations of finding a partner and eliciting enjoyment from the end of high school ritual ‘Prom Night’ (or, in its Australian version, ‘Year 12 Formal’) that prompt the narrative action in the film are so ubiquitous in cinema and TV drama that they don’t require any obvious filmic reference. *Wolf Creek’s* influence is more subtle, and includes its opening road scene and its use of music (discussed below). The final interaction of victim and pursuer on a road is reminiscent of both *Wolf Creek* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. But the chief distinguishing element between these filmic models and Byrne’s film is the director’s deliberate combination of the tongue-in-cheek extremism represented by the *Evil Dead* series (Sam Raimi, 1981, 1987, 1992) with youth-orientated comedy. As Byrne identifies:

*I was asking myself, What’s a fresh take on horror? What’s the next thing? So I thought, Why not take this extreme horror but also make it really, really fun… I wanted something balanced with jet-black comedy… you don’t feel bad as an audience member for going to watch this candy-coloured type of ghost ride.* (cited in Gibbs, 2010a: online)

Music

Music features prominently on *The Loved Ones’* soundtrack, an aspect signaled in the film’s credit sequence, which opens with four lines from ‘Superstar’, an unaccompanied ballad sung by Sophie Koh, that foreshadow elements of the narrative as perceived by its central female villain:

*Back in school you were high class*
*Didn’t say much to me*
*Johnny sat on the outside*
*You were his beauty queen*

This track is then interrupted by a burst of static and subsequent brief snatches of music and further static, imitating radio channels being flicked through, before a another track (‘The Lonesome Loser’, discussed below) is settled on to accompany a montage of static shots of a country town in the early morning.

Despite the director’s frequent use of the term ‘mash-up’ to describe his use of previous film works in the development of his scenarios, narrative and themes, the film’s musical soundtrack eschews mash-ups and combines original score, pre-recorded songs (as both score and infra-diegetic× score) and a song rendered by a character within the narrative. The original score for the film was written by Ollie Olsen and performed by Olsen and a small ensemble comprising Simon Polinski, Chris Rainer and a vocalist credited as ‘Pookie-Spookie’. Olsen’s original music is predominantly textural/atmospheric, in manner similar to that pursued by

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× That is, within the story space inhabited by the characters.
Decoder Ring in their score for Somersault (Cate Shortland, 2004) and by David Bridie in a number of Australian films and TV programs. Indeed, Olsen’s score largely eschews melodies (or else renders them as short fragments) allowing the timbres of individual sounds and/or the contrast of different timbres to communicate atmosphere and create a pervasive ‘spookiness’.  

Olsen’s music is complemented by, and often blends with, subtle atmospheric sound design by James Harvey and Robert Mackenzie. In terms of the references identified above, Lynch’s films are relevant for the atmospheric use of original score (mainly provided by composer Angelo Badalamenti), and Tarantino’s for his prominent use of pre-recorded popular song. As Byrne has emphasised:

_Im a big fan of Decoder Ring’s Somersault score and Badalamenti’s work on Lynch’s films. What I love about both those references is it’s not always easy to tell where the score ends and expressionistic sound design begins. And I encouraged that in both Ollie and my sound designers... In The Loved Ones the mind of the hero and the villains get frayed and stretched to snapping point and I wanted the score and sound design to go to that ‘other place’ with them._ (interview with the author March 2011)

Byrne’s own musical vision for the film was made evident in the initial ‘temp tracks’ that he selected for screenings of rough edits of the film for key investors, using

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6 Thanks to Jon Fitzgerald for his observations on timbre and (absence of) melody in the score (p.c. June 2011).
material by Fantômas (“for their jet black humour”) and Nine Inch Nails (“for their industrial relentlessness”) (ibid) and other pre-recorded material by (eventual) score composer Ollie Olsen. His choice of Olsen as composer stemmed from both his previous knowledge and admiration of Olsen’s work with Max Q and Third Eye, and their shared film genre interests:

*We met and had exactly the same taste in films and his DVD library was really similar to mine... he had a real love of horror in terms of Lynch and Cronenberg and... a great collection of Japanese horror, so I thought well this guy is not going to just do the traditional kind of horror score, he’s going to do something that is far more interesting and demented but still really disciplined.* (ibid)

Byrne has also emphasised the creative autonomy he gave his composer within the ‘template’ suggested by the temp tracks:

*Ollie understands darkness in a very sophisticated way and he’s a naturally zany guy, which perfectly covers both ends of The Loved Ones’ spectrum. Find someone like that, whose talent and personality exactly fit the bill then it's wise to let them take the ball and run with it.* (ibid)

Whereas prerecorded songs principally provide commentary on aspects of characterisation in the film; original score is used to prefigure and/or enhance unsettling, suspenseful or dramatic elements of the narrative. Examples of this occur throughout, such as around 19:00 (DVD time) when high, wordless vocal melodies and metallic tones are used texturally to accompany the sequence when Lola and her father kidnap Brent and drive him back to their remote house. The extended sequence around 24:00-25:00 where Brent revives in the family’s kitchen, tied to a chair at the dinner table around which the family is seated in formal attire, is particularly effective. Deep rumbling tones, reverberated percussion and sound washes signal the dangerous situation Brent finds himself in, with this sonic impression enhanced by the lack of dialogue and the sole diegetic sounds of his gasps and whimpers and his chair’s rattle against the floor as he attempts to free himself. Similar sound textures persist as he is subject to a forced injection and made to suck Lola’s finger and then to urinate into a glass at the table. The callous brutality of the actions is underscored by the harshness of the sound textures. Further sonic intensity occurs in the climactic horror scene around 53.30 when Lola attempts to lobotomise him with an electric drill. Both the scenario and the combination of score, motor noise, bodily splatter sounds and (choked) human screams closely recall similar sequences in Hooper’s *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and provide vivid sonic reinforcement of the horrific images of mutilation.
Pre-recorded Music

After the credit sequence and as Brent drives with his father, The Little River Band’s ‘Lonesome Loser’ (1979) continues, transitioning to a diegetic track playing on a car radio to which his father sings along before engaging Brent in conversation. The track is vintage Australian pop, recorded by a band that reached its commercial peak in the mid-late 1970s scoring hit singles and albums in both Australia and the USA with a melodic soft-rock style that invited comparison to The Eagles. The song serves as a cue for the men to sketch their close and warm relationship, affectionately bantering about changing musical aesthetics, with the father lamenting a decline in melody in modern music. This discussion is suddenly cut short when a blood-splattered male appears in the middle of the road, causing Brent to skid off the tarmac and into a tree, killing his father and setting the tone for the narrative that follows. In terms of the track’s role, it functions in a manner closely akin to the similar positioning of a comparably iconic 1970s’ Australian song (Daddy Cool’s ‘Eagle Rock’) in Wolf Creek during an early driving scene. Indeed the description of that song’s function given by Wolf Creek’s composer, Francoise Tetaz, and its director, Greg McLean, are as apposite for the use of The Little River Band’s song in The Loved Ones as the specific track Tetaz refers to in production notes for Wolf Creek:

*It is a quintessential Australian song that was a hit in its day and has some international currency. It is closely associated with Australia and is somewhat timeless (for a young audience). It makes the audience feel very comfortable at the beginning of the film and sets a false sense of security.*
(Tetaz, Wolf Creek Production notes: np)

And as McLean has elaborated:

*…there’s something very creepy about having a happy song like that to be in this kind of movie. I think on some level you hear that song and you think it’s some kind of a trick. It’s too good to be true to listen to a pop*
sequence like that. You know something is going to get fucked up. (in Turek, 2005: online)\(^7\)

In a process common to many feature films, whereby the choice of prerecorded musical material is largely determined by cost of clearances and when compromises and substitutions are common, ‘Lonesome Loser’ was not Byrne’s initial choice:

Before LRB I'd written Neil Diamond’s ‘Cherry, Cherry’ [1966] into the script because I wanted to start the film in a happy, infectious place, so there would be further to travel to get to Hell, meaning a bigger, more dramatic arc. But Neil was, as you’d expect, too expensive for an Australian movie so I started thinking about classic Australian songs that had an international feel and that’s when ‘Lonesome Loser’ sprung to mind. It’s not as high energy as ‘Cherry, Cherry’ but it has an Eagles-esque ease to it, which suited driving along a country road bathed in morning light. Plus the lyrics, ‘Have you heard about the Lonesome Loser’ felt like a foreshadowing of what was to unfold with our lonely, unhinged Princess. (interview with the author March 2011)

While the lyrics, to some extent, might be understood to foreshadow Lola’s personal trajectory in the film, this allusive element is somewhat diffuse as the song initially seems to allude to Brent, who is traumatised (and lost) as a result of his role in the crash (rather than the romantic disappointment that afflicts the protagonist of the LRB song). The song’s lyrics do not thereby function in the same clearly referential and/or ironic manner as the choice of Nan Vernon’s cover of Boudleaux Bryant’s 1960 song ‘Love Hurts’\(^8\) used in The Loved Ones’ online trailer, featuring graphic scenes of Lola tormenting Brent (a use which also has its own allusionism, since Vernon’s version previously featured on the soundtrack to Rob Zombie’s 2009 remake of John Carpenter’s Halloween II [1981]).

After this point in the film, various styles of rock music predominate. While this is far from unusual in youth-orientated genre films, there is a clear thematic logic and cohesion to the musical placement within the narrative, which the director explains in the following terms:

Brent listens to metal because it signifies the rage bottled inside him, his best friend Jamie listens to stoner rock because he likes to smoke doobies, and Princess, our villain, listens to ballads on the radio because they convey a yearning. If all these choices illuminate character then the soundtrack hopefully becomes a truthful reflection of the film, rather than feeling like something that’s just been slapped on to appeal to a certain demographic. (ibid)

The rock songs included in the final soundtrack also reflect the previously discussed budgetary constraints and substitutions:

\(^7\) It should also be noted that such uses of popular song material are something of a staple in horror cinema, other significant examples being the use of Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers’ iconic ‘American Girl’ on a car radio shortly before a young woman becomes a victim of Hannibal Lecter in Silence of The Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991); or the use of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s ‘Sweet Home Alabama’ on the radio in a van before the group of youngsters meet the first psychotic crazy in the remake of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Marcus Nispel, 2003).

\(^8\) Popularised by the Everly Brothers in 1960 and repopularised in 1975 with successful covers by Nazareth and Jim Capaldi.
I gave our music supervisor Craig Kamber a list of first choices, like Kyuss, Metallica, Carcass etc, which would invariably prove too expensive so he’d source less high profile artists with a similar feel then I’d pick the replacement tracks that fitted best. I’ve since come to love local metal outfit Parkway Drive, they’re right up there with the best in the world, and Black Like Vengeance, the other metal band used in the film, was a tip from our boom operator, whose brother plays in the band. Brent’s ‘Razor March’, which is our hardcore hero’s theme, is an original composition by Ollie. (ibid)

Along with these rock tracks, the film’s most prominent pre-recorded song is Kasey Chambers’ 2001 Australian hit single ‘Not Pretty Enough’. The choice of Chambers’ single as a signature song for Lola, and as a sonic fulcrum around which her personality and agency in the film revolves, was an astute one that can be understood to appeal to audiences on a number of levels.

An international audience unaware of the song’s performer and context can easily relate to the song by virtue of its direct lyrics, effective melodic structure, the ‘yearning’ tones of the singer’s vocal styling and the dynamics of the vocal delivery, backing and mixing. Chambers’ song conforms to a significant tradition of ‘loser’ love songs in Western popular music that includes such classic examples as Phil Everly’s ‘When Will I Be Loved?’ (1960), William Stevenson and Norman Whitfield’s ‘It Should Have Been Me’ (1968) and Anna McGarrigle’s ‘Heart like a Wheel’ (1975). Country music, as might be expected of a genre prone to sentimentalism, also has a rich lineage of ‘loser’ love songs, including such notable examples as Julie and Buddy Miller’s ‘Does My Ring Burn Your Finger?’ (1999), Bill Anderson, Buddy Cannon and Jamey Johnson’s ‘Give It Away’ (2005), and Sugarland’s ‘Stay’ (2006).

Chambers’ song commences with (what transpires to be) its chorus. Its lyrics seek answers to the vocal protagonist’s inability to attain what she desires:

- Am I not pretty enough?
- Is my heart too broken?
- Do I cry too much?
- Am I too outspoken?
- Don’t I make you laugh?
- Should I try it harder?
- Why do you see right through me?

The chorus is catchy and melodically appealing, arching upwards melodically until the end of the fourth line before declining and using large leaps (major sixths and perfect fifths) to emphasise key words (such as “pretty enough”, “heart too broken”, “cry too much”, “too outspoken”), emphasising the intensity of the singer’s frustrations. The emotional fragility and ‘nakedness’ of the lyrical questions and unornamented vocal melody are emphasised by the song’s initially sparse

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9 See Carriage and Hayward (2003) for more discussion of Chambers’ vocal techniques.


11 Thanks to Jon Fitzgerald for his observations on the melody of the song (p.c. June 2011).
instrumental accompaniment (picked acoustic guitar lines), and are emphasised by the low-set, almost depressed, rendition of the final chorus line “Why do you see right through me?” (which is later reprises as a repeated lyrical finale to the song).

The verses are more rhythmically driven and are supported by a greater range of accompanying instrumentation (provided by a standard rock band line-up), complementing Chambers’ greater vocal projection and harsher timbre and the more confident and assertive declarations:

- I live, I breathe, I let it rain on me
- I sleep, I wake, I try hard not to break
- I crave, I love, I’ve waited long enough
- I try as hard as I can

This pattern of gentle melodic chorus alternating with more aggressive up-tempo verses (in a style often associated with 1980s’ US band The Pixies and famously employed by Nirvana in the 1990s) persists throughout the song, signaling the lack of resolution in the vocal protagonist’s plight.

At a local level, an Australian audience can also access layers of prior familiarity with the genre, track and performer, including, in orders of increasingly specialised knowledge:

- a general perception of Australian country music as a signifier of regional/rural Australia
- an awareness of Chambers’ crossover ‘integrity’ within the Australian rock scene
- the social dance images and context of the music video that accompanied her 2001 single release
- awareness of the singer’s personal history/career background (including an isolated family upbringing on the Nullarbor Plain)

The identification of these potential levels of complementary association between the song/singer persona and Lola’s character does not imply (or require) a conscious deployment of them on Byrne’s part, but rather results from the bundle of associations pre-recorded material can provide to audiences able to access them. Byrne has described the song as “ideal” in that it “felt like it could have been written for the film” and has stated that he “chose it for the yearning and insecurity it evokes” (ibid). Less sympathetically, Jake Wilson’s review of the film in The Age newspaper identified the film’s use of the track as a deployment of the “maudlin hit” to “parody the self-pitying side of ‘girl culture’” (2010: online).

In terms of associations between the singer and the film, and, in particular, the sequences in which it was used, the coupling of the track with dark, horrific images represents a significant variation to the tone and themes of Chambers’ previous work and, most particularly, from the playful, child-orientated music, music video and book project she undertook with her father in 2010 under the band name Poppa Bill and the Little Hillbillies. Despite this, Byrne’s recontextualisation of Chambers’ song—and, by association, aspects of her professional persona—was approved by her management company who agreed to the use of the track after receiving copies of the script.
The song first occurs in the film at 21:17, when Lola arrives home with the unconscious Brent, with the song’s entry into the soundtrack accompanied by a close-up of an old, dusty cassette-radio on Lola’s bedroom table (as its apparent source). As the song’s opening chorus proceeds, the image track shows a montage of table-top items and Barbie dolls, suggesting youthful innocence before the image accompanying the line “Don’t I make you laugh?”, showing a Ken doll with a bandaged head on top of a pink-clad Barbie, sours the mood. As the song shifts to its more assertive first verse, the image track shows the cover of Lola’s scrapbook as she flicks through initial childish drawings before arriving at montages of male torsos. After cutting to the pin-k-clad Lola at her desk, the image shifts to a photo of Brent from a High School yearbook, which Lola scrawls over with red pen, marking a large red blotch on his forehead before cutting the image out and pasting it into her scrapbook. The track then continues as her father enters the room and presents his delighted daughter with a pink ball gown and pink high-heeled shoes. She then strips down to her pink underwear and tries it on for him, with the refrain “Am I not pretty enough?” accompanying the image of her presenting herself to her father, cuing him to utter the first line of dialogue in the scene, “Pretty as a picture”, eliciting a delighted smile from her. The smile, in turn, cues a musical tone that cuts the song short and allows a brief transition to the outside of the house, before shifting to the kitchen where Brent sits, barely conscious and bound to a chair in formal attire.

The track’s second appearance occurs at 47:45, as Lola stands embracing a (by now) heavily brutalised Brent, whose bound feet are fixed to the floor by a knife, as she sways to the first chorus of song as it plays on her cassette radio. The song and the dialogue it accompanies provide a key insight into Lola’s character and murderous pursuits. In the short instrumental gap between the chorus and first verse she informs Brent that, “When I find my prince this is the song we’re going to dance to at our wedding”. As the first verse commences she resumes swaying and the image shows her father showering glitter over the couple’s heads (as the lyrics declare “I let it rain on me”) before Lola declares, “But you’re not him” and, shifting to sudden anger, adds “You’re just another frog”, before stamping hard on his impaled foot. Leaving him shaking, she takes her father’s hand and asks, “Dance with me daddy?” They then dance slowly together, as Brent tries to escape his bounds, with Lola staring into her father’s eyes and telling him “You’re the prince, that’s why I can’t find one that I like… It’s always been you Daddy, just you and me”. Just as they are about to move into a kiss they are distracted by the noise of Brent slumping to his chair and the scene ends abruptly.

The song’s third outing differs from its predecessors in that it is sung by Lola, around 1:09:00, as she heads off to try find and locate and kill Holly (in revenge for Brent stabbing her father in the neck as he tries to escape for the second time). Walking down the middle of the road, holding a knife and clutching her scrapbook, she sings the song softly. Unlike Chambers’ artful variations of tone and melody, Lola’s version is muted and depressed, matching her facial expression. Hearing a car approach, she breaks off and hides by the side of the road. As Holly’s car (fortuitously) drives by, she flings the scrapbook at it, causing Holly to break and pause and allowing Lola to enter the vehicle and attack her rival, an action that leads to her eventual demise as Brent comes to his girlfriend’s rescue.
Box Office Performance and Reception

Despite SBS TV’s ‘The Movie Show’ awarding the film 4/5 stars\(^\text{12}\), *The Sydney Morning Herald* publishing a celebratory interview with lead actress Robin McLeavy (Gibbs, 2010b) and *Empire Magazine* offering high praise for the movie as an inventive genre piece (Gibbs, 2010a); *The Loved Ones* performed poorly at the Australian box office, grossing $300,124 (making it the 16\(^\text{th}\) best performing Australian release of the year in a national ‘pack’ lead by Stuart Beattie’s *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, which took $3.86 million)\(^\text{13}\). One possible explanation for its lack of domestic cinema success was a particularly Australian and, specifically, Tasmanian sensibility that may not have appealed to cinema audiences more attuned to the transnational-Hollywood product that continues to dominate Australian screens (comprising 95.5% of domestic gross in 2010\(^\text{14}\)). Lead actress Robin McLeavy (Lola), for example has identified that:

*Sean, the director, and I are both from Tasmania originally... And Tassie’s got some pretty dark history. It’s where they took the first convicts; it was the first convict state. Then there’s the Port Arthur massacre. The film really captures all that. The eerie isolation. It’s not set there – it could be anywhere in Australia – but it’s certainly inspired by all that.* (cited in Gibbs, 2010b: 9)\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Filming locations were actually in Melbourne and Victoria.
But while Byrne supports this perception, he has also argued that his film has a greater appeal, akin to that which contributed to Wolf Creek’s success in overseas markets:

*That kind of law exists right around the world – the further you get from the heart of the city, the crazier the things are meant to happen... It’s similar to Wolf Creek. Isolation is scary... Combine that with a lack of social interaction and that can start to play tricks on one’s brain.* (ibid)

Box office performance is notoriously difficult to predict and assess. While substantial marketing and multi-screen releases are obviously important, they do not guarantee mass audiences, as a long list of high-budget flops demonstrates. Australian films face particular difficulties in the domestic market in that they are often only released on limited screens and often gain release at the same time as bigger-budget Hollywood features that have been extensively pre-promoted. These factors were identified by several writers who lamented The Loved Ones’ poor cinematic performance and what it suggested about support for national cinema by local audiences. Tasmanian filmmaker Briony Kidd, for instance, has identified that:

*When it comes to Australian films there’s a whole extra layer of complexity, with the public’s perception about what an Australian film is, or should be, clouding the issue... it hasn’t helped that the film was released at the tail end of a string of major horror releases, including Paranormal Activity 2 and Saw VII. It was also unlucky enough to open the same weekend as a huge film aimed at a similar demographic, Jackass 3D.* (Kidd, 2010: online)

Despite the accomplishment and textural integration of the film’s music, its box office performance did not achieve any benefit from radio or TV music video screenings of material from the film, as these were not integrated into the promotional strategies for its release (and no soundtrack CD has subsequently been issued). The lack of boost from the rich and varied musical material featured in the film confirms that popular music is not a reliable commercial asset for films in itself but rather relies on conjunction with other promotional elements and platforms. More troubling for Australian cinema is the failure of a film so positively regarded by critics and so specifically targeted at a mass – rather than ‘art house’ – audience. In this regard, the film’s intricate allusionism is an ornament to a feature film that, yet again, emphasises that Australian national cinema occupies a precarious position on the rim of a global circuit and industry (still mainly) dominated by Hollywood. In this regard, Chambers’ song, and its combination of plaintive inquiry, sense of injustice and residual self-respect, is just as apposite as an anthem for the Australian film industry as it is for Lola in her thwarted quest for love and acceptance.

Cinema is of course only one outlet for feature film production and it is notable that various reviewers identified that the DVD rental/purchase market would be likely to prove a more fertile distribution outlet for such an idiosyncratic genre feature. In *The Mix* reviewer ‘Dave RH’, for instance, contended that, “the DVD format offers a far more lasting and suitable foundation for overlooked local productions and the ideal format for something as wonderfully unconventional as The Loved Ones” (2011: online). Similarly, commenting on the film’s likely reception in the North American market, Dennis Harvey commented in *Variety* that its “tale of a kidnapped high schooler in high extremis is probably too small and specialized
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for offshore theatrical interest but should win a fanbase through midnight fest slots and DVD release” (2010: online). While accurate DVD sales and rental figures were unavailable at time of writing (February 2012) the producer’s perceptions were that a greater audience base had been accessed through the domestic market and that the possibility of the film attaining an aficionado following is thereby open. Byrne’s feature may, therefore, prove “pretty enough” for eventual ‘cult’ status despite its disappointing cinema box office performance.

Conclusion

As the above discussions outline, music plays a key role in the construction and ‘colouration’ of the narrative, characterisation and settings of The Loved Ones. Byrne’s use of the song ‘Not Pretty Enough’, in particular, is pivotal. Its first inclusion serves to establish Lola’s persona; the second provides her with the opportunity to explicitly address her psycho-sexual fixation with her father; and the third comprises her direct enunciation of the lyrics as an expression of her frustration and her desire for revenge against Brent and Holly. This careful, deliberate use of the song complements the choices of other pre-recorded popular music tracks, which are principally used to enhance characterisation, and the film’s atmospheric and dramatic original score, which provides narrative and thematic nuances. These highly integrated uses are the opposite of the superficial allusionism bemoaned by Carroll and embraced by exponents of various Postmodern media practices and/or the proponents of 21st Century mash-ups. Instead they exhibit the highly crafted nature of classic Modernism, whereby quotation is integrated, contextualised and deployed for significant thematic and narrative purposes. In this sense, while the rhetoric and terminology about types of textual allusionism may have changed over the past three decades, classic Modernist paradigms continue to resonate with commercial filmmakers concerned to build upon and work within established genre heritages.

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References


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