SUBTLE IDIOSYNYCRACY
Sound and Music in the Australian animated short film The Lost Thing (2010)

Rebecca Coyle, Jon Fitzgerald and Philip Hayward

Abstract

Sean Tan and Andrew Ruhemann’s collaborative screen adaptation of Tan’s graphic short story ‘The Lost Thing’ is a highly accomplished work that gained international attention following its 2010 Academy Award for best short animation film. This article provides textual and contextual analyses of and reflections on the particular aesthetics of sound and music employed in the film and identifies the manner in which these represent a distinctly local and idiosyncratic approach to auralising the author’s visual narratives. As individual sections detail, the collaborative and interactive aspects of particular sonic components are also notable for representing a subtle compositional integration of elements—rather than a set of relationships between autonomous elements determined in the final sound mix (as is often the norm for cinematic production).

Keywords

Animation cinema, soundtrack, The Lost Thing, Sean Tan

Introduction

Animated film production began in Australia in the pre-synch sound era and continued intermittently through to the late 1950s when television broadcasting commenced and began to offer expanded opportunities for local producers. Australia’s first locally produced animated feature film, Eric Porter’s Marco Polo and the Red Dragon, was produced in 1972 but arguably the most significant local venture in this period was the production operation established by Polish producer-director Yoram Gross, who relocated to Sydney from Israel in 1968. In addition to producing short-form material, such as animation sequences for the popular TV music show Bandstand, the company went on to produce commercially successful Australian animation features such as Dot and the Kangaroo (1977) and Blinky Bill (1992), the latter being released in the same year as another internationally successful Australian animation feature film Fern Gully (dir:...
Bill Kroyer, 1992). In tandem with these production activities, Australian animation talent was also honed by working with the Disney subsidiary Animation Australia, which operated in Sydney between 1988 and 2006. More recently, a lively independent sector has developed producing short films, music videos and experimental items. This sector has recently come to prominence with the success of animators such as Adam Elliot and Shaun Tan, who, respectively, won Academy Awards (‘Oscars’) for best short animation films in 2004 (for Harvey Crumpet) and in 2011 (for The Lost Thing). One of the significant aspects of Elliott’s and Tan’s work is that they have achieved international recognition for productions whose aesthetics are informed by place and Australian culture—arguably, an element that gives them a sense of freshness and difference from their North American contemporaries. This article analyses the soundtrack of Tan’s The Lost Thing and the manner in which it imparts a particular sense of mood and place that reflects the product’s cultural points of inspiration.

As a number of authors have identified, screen animation provides rich opportunities for sound and music, given that there is no location sound to work with and its audio-visual worlds are thereby entirely created. Animation often calls for much more music than live action, in order to provide continuity and flow, and music and sound are regularly called on to assist in defining objects and characters, giving them scale, scope and specific profiles through their sonic dimensions. Characters are also given expressive range through their sound. In this manner, animation is a demanding medium for sound designers and musicians since music and sound need to work with the contrived motion, location and the interaction of characters with their imagined world. In addition, any abstract concepts that the film conveys or explores also need to be developed using music and sound. Aside from the early work of Hill (1998), Australian animation media soundtracks have been largely overlooked by academics and journalists and this article provides a step towards a more sustained investigative engagement with the form and its local particularities through detailed analysis of one particular production.

I. Context

One element that Elliot and Tan share is a deployment of narrative to explore abstract concepts through a reflective—rather than action-driven—approach. Elliot and Tan also pursue a distinctly urban aesthetic. Their work employs visuals that are highly stylised yet intrinsically realist. Images are often muted in texture and contrast and show untidy and decidedly un-glamorous locales appropriate to their films’ urban locations and themes. The directors’ work also evinces a certain laconic cynicism combined with a sense of nostalgia that might also be argued to represent a distinctly Australian sensibility. Tan’s The Lost Thing typifies this approach and, indeed, his overall oeuvre is suffused by it.

---

2 Contributing to Disney features such as The Return of Jafar (1994, directed by Tad Stones and Alan Zaslove) and Aladdin and the King of Thieves (1996, Tad Stones).

Tan grew up in the northern suburbs of Perth (Western Australia) and began drawing and painting images for science fiction and horror stories in small-press magazines as a teenager. After graduating from the University of Western Australia in 1995 (with a Bachelor of Arts), he moved across the continent and currently works full-time as a freelance artist and author based in Melbourne. Tan has become best known for illustrated books that deal with social, political and historical subjects through surreal, dream-like imagery. Books such as his collaboration with popular Australian young adult fiction writer John Marsden, ‘The Rabbits’ (1998), and sole authored and illustrated volumes such as ‘The Red Tree’ (2002), ‘Tales from Outer Suburbia’ (2008) and his wordless graphic novel ‘The Arrival’ (2006), have been widely praised and translated into many languages. Tan has also worked as a theatre designer and as a visual concept artist on the films ‘Horton Hears a Who’ (Jimmy Hayward, 2008) and Pixar’s ‘WALL-E’ (Andrew Stanton, 2008). Tan’s film adaptation of his book ‘The Lost Thing’ was made in collaboration with British producer-director Andrew Ruhemann. Ruhemann began working for Richard Williams’ studio in the late 1980s, contributing to productions such as Robert Zemeckis’ 1988 feature ‘Who Framed Roger Rabbit?’ before establishing the company Passion Picture, whose initial work had a similar emphasis on classical 2D character animation and special effects. In recent years Passion Pictures’ range of styles has expanded to include stop frame and computer animation (see, for instance, the first four Gorillaz music videos*).

Tan initially wrote ‘The Lost Thing’ in 1998 and developed it into a 32-page illustrated book that was published in 2000. The work’s narrative involves a boy who discovers a bizarre looking creature while out collecting bottle tops at the beach. Realising that it is lost, he tries to find out who owns it or where it belongs. He is met with indifference—people are either completely oblivious to the creature’s presence, or, at best, they barely notice it. The boy empathises with the creature, and sets out to find a ‘place’ for it. The narrative unfolds in a surreal world that is rather bleak but in a slightly comic way—with the main protagonists wending their way through a treeless, urban environment with odd-looking people and hybrid, machine-like creatures. Fittingly, in this regard, the visual design of Tan’s ‘lost thing’ bears more than passing resemblance to Dadaist/Surrealist painter Max Ernst’s fantastical quasi-mechanical ‘Elephant Celebes’ in his eponymous 1921 painting but without the unsettling, grey, mechanical otherness of the latter’s ‘elephant’ creature. Indeed, one of the most original and striking aspects of Tan’s creation is its appeal. As one reviewer colourfully characterised, referring primarily to the ‘thing’s’ rendition in the film version: “the first thing that struck me... is how fricking adorable it is. It is never revealed what the thing could be—it’s difficult to even lump it into one of the animal, vegetable or mineral categories (steampunk hermit crab squidplant?)—but it’s certainly hella cute” (Camilleri, 2010: online)

After encountering the publication at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair in 2000, Ruhemann approached Tan to collaborate on adapting ‘The Lost Thing’ into an animation film. Storyboarding was completed in 2001 and 2002, adapting the 32-page book into a 15-minute narrative, and the film’s

visuals were created in collaboration with CGI artist Tom Bryant and artist Leo Baker.

Tan has elaborated that his adaptation fulfilled his original impression of the project in that:

In re-creating the story from the ground up, we’ve elaborated some aspects of the ‘Lost Thing universe’ which could not be entirely expressed within the confines of the original 32-page book. In fact, I always saw the story in my imagination as a short film or theatrical piece, where the book presents us with a set of stills from some larger production. The key character, a faceless creature, has an inherently animated personality which a painting struggles to convey—and finds its full expression in the medium of film... I’m more accustomed to working with still, silent pictures that allow a viewer plenty of time to contemplate individual compositions. Animation is a very different medium, where questions of time and pace are much more critical, not to mention layers of sound and music. (Tan, 2010: online)

In order to realise and expand Tan’s narrative and thematic vision through sound, Tan and co-director Ruhemann employed an experienced production team to create a distinct soundscape for the film.

II. The Soundscape Team

The soundtrack for The Lost Thing integrates three primary elements—sound design/Foley, spoken narration and original music. The sound design and Foley layers were provided by Melbourne DJ, remixer and sound designer John Kassab and experienced sound recordist and Foley artist Adrian Medhurst (who had previously worked on Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings trilogy [2001–2003] and Sarah Watt’s combined live action and animation feature Look Both Ways [2005]). The narration was provided by comedic singer-songwriter and cabaret artist Tim Minchin, a performer known for his droll and laconic vocal delivery. The original score was provided by composer Michael Yezerski (who had previously scored Elissa Down’s 2008 feature The Black Balloon). Yezerski was the only team member with previous experience in engaging with Tan’s work, having collaborated with violinist Richard Tognetti to write a concert piece based around Tan’s novel ‘The Red Tree’ that was performed by a chamber orchestra and the 40 member children’s Gondwa Voices choir along with projected illustrations from Tan’s original book (see Wilson, 2008).

Research conducted by co-authors Coyle and Hayward for their 2007–2011 Australia Research Council funded project on the Australian film music and sound production sector5 identified a number of aspects of national practice that differed from that of the North American film industry. Whereas the scale and volume of productions in North America has resulted in both a high degree of role specialisation and relatively autonomous creative

---

5 DP0770026 ‘Music Production and Technology in Australian Film: Enabling Australian Film to Embrace Innovation’, 2007–2011, chief investigators: Rebecca Coyle, Michael Hannan and Philip Hayward.
activities—which are then crafted into the final audio-visual text by sound editors adept at integrating the various sonic elements—the typically low-budget nature of Australian production and the more limited work opportunities on offer has led to a multi-skilled, flexible and adaptable pool of professionals who are comfortable with (and often actively interested in) creative collaboration and dialogue. The production history of The Lost Thing exemplifies this aspect of the national sector. The film’s soundtrack was devised over a six-month period, a relatively long gestation for the creation of sound for a short film. Kassab notes that this facilitated an unusually high level of collaboration in combining sound and visual elements (even noting that national tendency identified above):

working at the same time as animation and assembly gave the sound department collaborative input on the way some of the cuts were made to retain the musical and rhythmic integrity of the sound design. It’s a truly rare thing when a sound designer can ask picture department for a few more or less frames here and there to make the sound work better (in Isaza, 2011: online).

A similarly close level of collaboration was evident within the sound team itself. While Kassab notes that his normal process is to create the internal sounds and vocalisations and provide notes on external sounds for the Foley artist; the closeness of the collaboration on The Lost Thing regularly led to a blurring of boundaries. As he has identified “as sound people working with a fun character like this, we couldn’t help ourselves and we both over-stepped those boundaries on every occasion completely merging our roles beyond those of sound designer or Foley artist respectively” (ibid).

Kassab displayed an equally collaborative attitude in relation to his work with composer Michael Yezerski:

a lot of the discussion surrounded the types of instruments that Michael [Yezerski] was going to use in different scenes, and so I went through and revised a lot of the scenes that we had originally by taking out a lot of the bass frequencies if there were gonna be, like, bass instruments coming through or vica-versa, so that each didn’t clash on the other (Kassab, interview in Coleman, nd: online).

Kassab also acknowledges the input of re-recording mixer Doron Kipen “who refined our work further to fit around the music and voice over” (in Isaza, 2011: online).

Finally, although Tim Minchin cannot be seen as an ongoing member of the sound ‘team’ in the same manner as the personnel discussed above (given that he recorded his narration independently with Tan), the importance of his input should not be underestimated. Tan has identified that Minchin was chosen for the role for his particular persona:

He’s a very eloquent, articulate person... quite intellectual but in the same sense, laid back and has a certain casualness in his approach... and I think to some extent he might have been able to identify with the character ‘cos we’re both West Australians... there’s something about the world of The Lost Thing that has a
West Australian feel to me, a sense of very long sunburnt childhood... with vast amounts of space and not a lot going on and it creates a certain sense of isolated reflection (‘The Lost Thing Voice Record Session with Tim Minchin’, video, 2010: online).

Appropriately in this regard, Minchin’s voice incorporates characteristic Anglo-Australian speech mannerisms, as well as a laconic delivery that connects with the laid-back ‘Aussie’ stereotype and the unhurried nature of the existential narrative. Since the vocal track has a limited volume, pitch and tonal range, it functions as a relatively constant and predictable element for the sound and music to weave around.

III. The unfolding soundscape of The Lost Thing

In order to illustrate ways in which sound, music and narration are used to enhance narrative, visual and emotional elements in The Lost Thing, the following section of this article provides a detailed scene-by-scene description and musicological and sonological characterisation of the film’s unfolding soundscape that is subsequently interpreted in Section IV.

As the film credits appear on screen, a soft ‘white noise’ synth sound is joined by a sweet, spacious guitar melody set in the bright-sounding upper register and played over a bed of slowly-changing chords. The guitar melody is very simple (see Example 1), as is the accompanying chord progression (C–Ami7)—the latter also providing an immediate sense of major/minor ambiguity. The instrumental melody is immediately joined by a range of sound effects associated with the on-screen arrival and departure of a train. This provides an early contrast between musical and non-musical sound, and hints that both will play important roles within the ensuing animation. The third important sound element (the narrator’s voice) is introduced at 00.35, completing the set of sound material (i.e. instrumental music, Foley/sound effects, human voice) that is carefully interwoven throughout the fifteen-minute narrative. The sound of the narrator’s voice is notable for its understated, ‘deadpan’ character—with very little contour in terms of volume and pitch range—and the voice is intentionally highlighted through being placed over a minimal background of soft sustained ‘synth’ sounds.

As the narration continues, a variety of sounds is used to underscore changing visual elements, as the main human character (a boy apparently in his teens) walks onto a sandy beach. These delicate and subtle sounds, placed low in the mix, include footsteps, rustling newspaper, seagull cries, 

---

6 Timing references identified below are taken from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T48d1STzdnM.
rippling water, and bells. As the ‘lost thing’ first comes into view (1.17), a new bright guitar theme makes a sudden, surprising entrance. This theme parallels the opening guitar theme by taking the form of a slow, sustained melodic idea and another two-chord, major to minor progression a third apart (in this case Cadd9–Emi).

Non-musical sounds come into prominence as the boy taps on a door on the side of the ‘lost thing’, which comes to life and moves around in response. Removal of the instrumental music at this point helps to highlight a range of interesting and varied mechanical sound effects associated with the odd, machine-like creature. Mechanical sounds include metallic-sounding creaks, thumps/bangs, roars and groans, and there are more bell sounds. Instrumental music re-enters at 2.31 after the ‘lost thing’ throws a beach ball to the boy and after they begin to play together. This happy-sounding rhythmic idea features a repetitive guitar motif supported by sustained synth strings and percussion. A simple major-key melody highlights the semitone between octave and major seventh scale degree (see Example 2).

A siren sound at 3.00 (indicating the impending closure of the beach/playground) signals a change of direction in the narrative, and an associated change in the sound focus. As the game between the boy and the ‘lost thing’ ceases, instrumental music is again removed to highlight a range of interesting sounds (including loudspeaker noises, closing beach umbrellas, seagulls, creaking wheels); after which the narration is foregrounded. Instrumental music re-enters at 3.18, in the form of slow echoing sounds plus warm, processed guitar sounds. At 3.35 another simple guitar melody enters (see Example 3) and the accompanying chord progression (Emi–Cmaj7) represents a reversal/inversion of previous patterns. At this point music takes the leading role in setting a poignant mood that matches the narration “no denying the unhappy truth—it was lost” and complements images of the ‘lost thing’ wandering around, ignored by all. Music fades out from 4.07, allowing attention to return to the narration, then the Emi–C progression re-enters at 4.35. A section of narration is followed by a brief piece of music, and then the narrator sums up the opening section, saying “Some things are like that; they’re just plain lost.” A very loud train sound and full-screen image of a large moving train provide an emphatic ending to this section of the animation.
The next section begins at 5.06 with the boy deciding to take the ‘lost thing’ home. A lengthy period (over 30 seconds) ensues in which music is entirely absent, leaving narration and sound effects to provide the aural interest as the boy brings the ‘lost thing’ into his lounge room and then takes it to hide in the back shed. By now, the sound of bells (especially those attached to the ‘lost thing’) has begun to assume a leitmotiv role within the animation. As the boy tries to make the ‘lost thing’ feel at home in the back shed, narration ceases, and music again comes into focus to provide support for the emotional content of the film. A variant of the first instrumental melody re-enters at 5.54; then at 6.33 the music becomes rhythmic and much louder in the mix, featuring a series of synth arpeggios and heavy low guitar notes. This section of music (together with a range of varied sound effects) underscores a scene in which the boy and ‘lost thing’ interact in a gentle, mutually-supportive manner, as the ‘lost thing’ carefully sets up a ladder for the boy to climb so that he can ‘feed’ it.

Music is again removed at the beginning of the new section—which begins at 6.55 with the narrator enunciating the boy’s perception, saying “The lost thing seemed happy then, but I sure couldn’t keep it in the shed forever.” Visual attention is first focused on the interior of the boy’s home, with the soundtrack foregrounding an extended section of diegetic sound (in the form of a spoken TV advertisement for the ‘Federal Department of Odds and Ends’). As the boy and ‘lost thing’ make their way into the city on a tram and then enter a large grey building, a variety of sounds (including footsteps, tram sounds, doors slamming) are used to complement related visual images. Inside the building, the dark and eerie visual elements are effectively supported by eerie sounds—such as (soft and loud) white noise and whistling, wind-like sounds. The only ‘music’ at this point consists of a few sustained single electronic-sounding tones, while ubiquitous rattling bell sounds provide a continuing reminder of the presence of the ‘lost thing’.

At 8.38 the impact of the sudden appearance of a spotlight on the boy is accentuated by a jarring, electronic-sounding buzz, and the boy looks up to a distant receptionist and tells her he has a ‘lost thing’. After she instructs him, in a bored monotone voice, to “fill in the form” a rumbling mechanical noise crescendos ominously until the visuals lead to a metal locker that opens to reveal a large pile of forms. The spotlight is suddenly switched off, and the boy and ‘lost thing’ are left alone to grapple with uncaring bureaucracy in the dimly lit, minimally-furnished building. The soundscape at this point is correspondingly minimal, with just an occasional rustling of papers disturbing the silence. Just as everything seems to be going from bad to worse, some hope is revived by the appearance of a small, rat-like, mechanical creature that is sweeping the floor of the building. In whispered undertones, the creature urges the boy not to leave the ‘lost thing’ in this “place for forgetting, leaving behind”. A short sequence of increasingly high-range bell sounds provides a subtle aural hint of hope.

After the narrator says, “It was some kind of sign, I guess” (9.57) another dramatic change in the visuals signals a new section within the film. A brightly lit, full screen image of a collage of city signs (including ‘No Parking’ and ‘No Entry’ signs, and humorous offerings such as ‘Sign Not In Use’) appears suddenly, and the boy ponders the note (with an arrow) that the small creature had handed him just earlier. The ‘lost thing’, seemingly energised by this development, begins to move off as if in search of
something, and music is again called on as to underscore the prevailing emotional tone (in this case happier and more upbeat). The music track begins (at 10.12) with a light, rhythmic counterpoint of tuned percussion instruments, which is subsequently joined by rich sustained synth string chords and some low bass frequencies. The chord progressions (Cmaj7–Emi7; C6/9–Emi7) represent further small variations of the original two-chord, major to minor idea; and the sound of the ‘lost thing’s’ bells merge seamlessly into the overall musical texture. As the narration resumes (at 10.56) the music is gradually faded out, leaving just the narrator’s voice and the sound of the ‘lost thing’s’ bells. Suspense is created by a period of near silence as the boy notices a large door with a key and decides to open it to see what is on the other side. Electronic sounds add to the suspense as a small light shines through an opening in the door, and the door finally opens.

At 11.47 the opening musical theme is suddenly recapped as light streams in on the boy and the ‘lost thing’, providing a brightening of the visual elements as well as offering a symbol of hope. As they enter what appears to be a stadium, they begin to notice some strange machine-creatures. After the relative drabness of the urban scenes, the stadium offers a vibrant scenario of odd and colourful creatures—many of which are sound-producing objects (such as an accordion, large bell, mechanical industrial artifacts, a TV fish, a beating heart, and bird-like flying objects). At first, the soundtrack highlights sound effects linked specifically to some of the individual creatures, but at 12.01 these sounds virtually disappear as the musical track moves emphatically into the foreground. The new musical theme is a bright, rhythmic ‘Chet Atkins’-style guitar pattern, supported at first by percussion sounds and then by synth strings. This theme is developed into the longest piece of continuous music in the film (more than one minute) by expanding the earlier two-chord vocabulary into a repeated four-bar progression (C–Emi/B–Ami–Emi/B), and even taking a temporary excursion in to a different key centre (Bb).

After this rhythmic theme ceases (at 13.07), variants of a several earlier musical ideas appear in turn to underscore visuals that depict the ‘lost thing’ deciding to join its new ‘friends’ and say goodbye to the boy. The second theme (see Example 2) is briefly recapped in a lower octave with a warmer guitar sound, while the third idea (see Example 3) appears in a lower register and at a much slower tempo. When the ‘lost thing’ turns it back on the stadium to say its goodbyes to the boy, rhythmic arpeggios are constructed from the C–Emi progression used earlier in the animation. The leitmotiv bell sounds are foregrounded as the boy touches ‘hands/claws’ with the ‘lost thing’ in a gentle parting gesture, and the lengthy stadium scene ends with the closure of the large entrance door and a low, resounding thump.

Music is absent from the entire closing section, leaving narration and various electronic and mechanical sound effects to carry the soundtrack. Train sounds and images provide an aural and visual link to the opening scenes, and the narrator offers some wistful comments about losing the ability to notice lost things. The final credits are accompanied by train sounds and gentle electronic rumbles, and the animation ends with a brief view (and sound) of the rat-like, mechanical floor sweeper—the overall audio-visual effect being a pronounced diminuendo.
IV. Style, Anachronism and Idiosyncracy

Kassab has characterised the manner in which Tan envisaged a world for *The Lost Thing* Tan “powered by steam, clogs and gears”; one which was “futuristic in its rate of expansion and apparent lack of humanity but was still so old-fashioned in the way it operated and the technology it used” (Kassab, in Isaza, 2011: online). While the sound designer does not use the specific term, the description of the brief he was given is closely akin to that of the ‘Steampunk’ aesthetic. This aesthetic, and a subsequent genre embodying it, was first recognised in the work of a number of authors in the 1980s and 1990s (see Robb, 2012 for discussion). While the aesthetic has been most prevalent in literature it has also been represented on-screen in feature films such as Stephen Norrington’s eponymous adaptation of Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s graphic narrative ‘The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen’ (2003) or Barry Sonnenfeld’s eccentric big-budget epic *Wild Wild West* (1999). The genre has also spawned a youth subcultural scene in Western Europe and North America that has developed distinct styles and iconographies based Victorian era technologies extrapolated into an alternative future. One significant element of this scene has been the development of a network of Steampunk musicians and bands. While the Steampunk aspects of these acts has often been primarily evident in their visual appearance and/or lyrics, some observers identified a distinct sonic approach prevalent in the late 2000s based on “sonorous, half-spoken vocals and melancholy melodies influenced by Tom Waits and eastern European Gypsy bands” (Sullivan, 2008: online). More recently however, musician Janus Zarate of Steampunk band Vernian Process, have produced far less prescriptive definitions based on sensibilities rather than sounds:

_The literature provides the substance, and new technologies provide the instruments. Ultimately, the selections hardly comprise a traditional genre, but they make for a satisfying playlist of musicians... How then should we define the music of steampunk, if not by genre? We need only turn to its heritage—not just to the artists of our time, but to their musical and non-musical predecessors... We must bring the spirit of anachronism to the music, forging innovation from the melding of past and present._ (Zarate, 2011: online)

While there is no evidence that any of the film’s production personnel consciously engaged with Steampunk discussions (or precedents), we can see them as negotiating similar issues in addressing their creative brief for the film. Appropriately, with regard to the above discussions, the general brief given to the sound team employed by Tan and Ruhermann was that “this is a mechanical world... and this whole digital thing really doesn’t exist” (Kassab, interview in Coleman, n.d: online). Although *The Lost Thing* employs CG (computer graphics), Tan describes the film as embodying “a unique aesthetic that avoids the artificiality of CG objects; almost every surface is essentially hand-painted using non-digital materials: acrylic paint, pencil, oils and collage” (2010: online). In keeping with this ‘low-tech’ orientation, the soundtrack largely avoids digitally-created sound effects in favour of recorded sound material. As a result, the creation of sounds became an extremely complex and lengthy process. As Kassab has identified:
In this 15 min film, there are 22 locations and 74 characters and all required stylized sounds. As the worlds and characters did not exist in our own world, each needed extensive analysis, conceptualization and experimentation. Even the ‘human’ characters had unfamiliar dimensions and walking styles, requiring unique sound treatments. This lead to the recording of over 1800 sounds and a total of 13 months of work between myself and the wonderfully gifted Foley artist, Adrian Medhurst (Kassab, n.d: online).

The complexity of the sound creation task reached a peak in the so-called ‘Utopia’ theme (in which the ‘lost thing’ discovers a stadium full of potential new ‘friends’). During this part of the animation, Kassab and Medhurst faced the challenge of creating distinct sounds associated with around forty different mechanical creatures. Kassab recalls the added pressure of feeling “constantly fearful of letting down the fans of the original book” (in Isaza, 2011: online).

The primary functions of non-musical sound are to emphasise aspects of changing environments and environmental ‘atmospheres,’ and to provide characteristic aural signatures for some of the mechanical creatures (that also conform to the innately anachronistic tendency so beloved of Steampunk aficionados, as discussed above). For example, train sounds regularly provide a sense of the urban environment (as well as symbolising the overall ‘journey’ through the narrative). Delicate individual sounds (such as rustling newspaper, seagull cries, and rippling water) provide a strong sense of the beach environment; while the eerie atmosphere inside the dark building is enhanced by the sparse placement of a variety of eerie sound effects (such as whistling ‘wind’ sounds). Sound effects (such as metallic-sounding creaks, rattles, thumps/bangs, and the ubiquitous bells) are especially important in providing the ‘lost thing’ with an aural signature. As sound designer, Kassan also took primary responsibility for the selection, manipulation and placement of subtle sustained sounds that provide subtle atmospheric and character-enhancing effects at various places throughout the film, a process he has described as using “a lot of soft synthesis in the creation of the musical and sub bass sounds” (in Isaza, 2011).

Composer Michael Yezerski created a range of original music that also fitted with the ‘low-tech’ philosophy of the general brief provided to the sound team by using the ‘natural’ sounds of acoustic guitar and (tuned and unturned) percussion instruments rather than succumbing to the temptation of using quirky ‘electronic’ sounds to characterize the film’s quirky cityscapes, landscapes and creatures. The accessible and seductive instrumental timbres, appealing melodic ideas and simple harmonies and rhythms have a subtly idiosyncratic aspect that is also consistent with Ruhemann’s desire for Tan’s work to reach an international audience.

Music plays an important role in setting a general tone for the film at the beginning. The sound of the spacious acoustic guitar theme over a bed of slowly-changing chords hints at the laconic, contemplative, happy/sad tone of the film. From then on, the main role of musical sound is to enhance the emotional impact of scenes, especially those involving interaction between the boy and the ‘lost thing’. For example, happy-sounding instrumental music underscores the scene in which the ‘lost thing’ and the boy play ball
together, while music plays the leading role in setting a poignant mood around the time when the boy/narrator says “no denying the unhappy truth—it was lost.” Music is again prominent (along with some varied sound effects) in setting a gentle emotional tone when the ‘lost thing’ helps the boy to feed it. A happier musical tone is used when the boy and the ‘lost thing’ leave the dark building and set off to follow the note provided by the rat-like machine creature. The happiest scene of all—the ‘Utopia’ or stadium scene—is notable for the way in which happy-sounding music comes into the foreground to help set the emotional tone; and music plays the leading role in underscoring the happy/sad emotions surrounding the final goodbyes between the boy and the lost thing. Music also plays a role in inserting aural ‘colours’ that offer some respite from the somewhat bleak environmental sounds associated with many of the urban locales. In the same way that the redness of the ‘lost thing’ stands out from the greys of the urban settings (even at the beach), bright musical timbres (for example, steel-string acoustic guitar, marimbas, xylophone, glockenspiel) contrast with duller and lower-frequency sounds (such as background hums and general traffic noise).

As previously noted, the third sound element—the narrator’s voice—is notable for its laconic, ‘deadpan’ quality. In addition to having very little contour in terms of volume and pitch range, the vocal sound is also notable for its timbral ‘dullness,’ with mid and bass frequencies dominating over high frequencies. The technique of highlighting the narration by employing it on its own, or with a minimal sound and/or music background, serves two functions within the film. As well as bringing important narrative developments (and associated philosophical musings) into clear focus, it allows the vocal timbre to function as a recurring block of relatively colourless sound, against which varied musical and sound-effect colours are contrasted.

Ultimately, one of the most striking things about the use of sound and music in The Lost Thing is the way in which the three sound elements— instrumental music, Foley/sound effects, human voice—are so effectively interwoven and contrasted throughout the fifteen-minute narrative. As the earlier scene-by-scene description of the unfolding soundscape indicates, the focus of the soundtrack continually alternates between music, sound, and narration, and there is considerable variation in the way these elements are combined. The meticulous combining of sound elements also plays a important role in creating the conspicuously spacious and uncluttered quality of the soundtrack. As sound designer Kassab notes: “With so much going on in every scene, it was all about weaving all of the elements in and around each other to tell the story of character and place whilst taking care not to overcrowd the track at any one point” (in Isaza, 2011: online). The issue of sonic ‘overcrowding’ was particularly relevant in dealing with the very busy ‘Utopia’ scene with its stadium full of mechanical creatures; and the manner in which the sound team dealt with this challenge offers further insight into the highly collaborative creative atmosphere that characterised the making of the film. Kassab describes how he (and Foley artist Medhurst) painstakingly created individual sounds for each of the machine-creatures in the scene, only to see these sounds abandoned in favour of the prominent music track that allowed the scene to be more emotional and less mechanical (Kassab, in Coleman, n.d.). Even more significantly, this process emphasizes the sound team’s ultimate commitment to serve the vision of the
directors, rather than merely display their individual creative talents: “What we’d hoped is that the audience member would never really be aware of sound versus music but be an audience member who was following the story and the emotional intent of the directors” (Kassab, in Coleman, n.d: online).

Conclusion

As discussed in Section II, Tan has emphasised his film’s roots in what he perceives as a Western Australian sensibility, characterised by spaciousness, stasis and a general sense of remoteness, producing a sense of lackadaisical disengagement from the everyday world. The latter elements are evident in the thematic unfolding and tonal qualities of The Lost Thing’s drama. The slow-moving pace of the film allows viewers time to savour the distinctive narrative, visual and aural elements; and the meticulous placement and blending of music, sound effects, Foley and narration adds considerably to the spacious and uncluttered quality of the film. Our earlier references to surreal aspects of the visual imagination of the film are both general (ie small ‘s’ surreal) and specific (as in the ‘lost thing’s’ previously noted resemblance to Max Ernst’s ‘Elephant Celebes’) and are elements that operate in an urban space characterised by its languidity. While the urban locales and odd technologies depicted in the film are somewhat unsettling, and evoke elements of Steampunk fiction and iconography; any threats they pose are muted and, as in the hall of the Department of Odds and Ends, quaintly Kafkaesque. While the inspirational cultural contexts of works are rarely—if ever—deterministic, Tan’s film and its soundtrack can be interpreted as a distinctly local product and, thereby, as an expression of a particularly idiosyncratic sensibility; one where art historical and sonic references are localised and reinflected to create a novel use of the medium and a highly distinctive animation film text.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Rosa Coyle-Hayward for her contribution to the original conference paper upon which this article is based.7

References


7 See footnote 1 to this article.


Robb, Brian J (2012) Steampunk: An Illustrated History of Fantastical Fiction, Fanciful Film and Other Victorian Visions, Minneapolis: Voyageur Press


