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Starrs, D. Bruno (2008) Graham Tardif and the aural auteur.
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Graham Tardif and the Aural Auteur.

D. Bruno Starrs on Rolf de Heer's composer collaborator.

Not only does the subject matter of Rolf de Heer's films vary widely, his soundtracks are also always different and unexpected, and are at times raised to a level of dominance amongst the numerous interactions informing the narrative. Music scholar Cat Hope comments: "each of de Heer's films merits a detailed treatise on the way they feature innovative sound ideas in the scripting and production stages, resulting in some of the most challenging and exciting cinema made in Australia today" (see http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/31/sound_design_rolf_de_heer.html). This auteur's attention to the aural is perhaps exemplified by his long term collaboration with composer Graham Tardif, who I interviewed in May of this year. Tardif has created the music for ten of de Heer's twelve feature films, the exceptions being a concession to the jazz artistry of the legendary Miles Davis and Michel Legrand in *Dingo* (1991) and the Indigenous Australian performers of their own music in *Ten Canoes* (2006).

Since meeting de Heer when the budding writer/director/producer was still at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, and composing the music for his diploma short, *The Audition*, Tardif's subsequent career highs include *The Tracker* (2002) which he says "was built around the idea of these paintings [by Peter Coad] and these ten or eleven songs going through the film. To a large extent, the music informs [de Heer's] thinking." Certainly, de Heer is a director attuned to sound designer Randy Thom's demand that directors should be "Designing a movie for sound" (see http://www.filmsound.org/articles/designing_for_sound.htm), not simply leaving it to the end in the hope it may be somehow improved by the hasty addition of some great music. Tardif explains how early he is usually involved by de Heer in the process: "We'd have a lot of discussions and we'd sit down and talk about what it should be like and we'd plot the film out together and then I'd come up with the music based on that discussion [...] but I'd actually start serious thinking when there's a finished script." I asked Tardif how he communicates melodic ideas to someone without musical training and he responded, "We speak in terms of the feeling of the scene or the underlying emotion that he's trying to convey rather than discussing diminished sevenths or anything like that. We can talk musical styles, I

mean he's not illiterate to the extent that we can't talk about whether it would be a western style or a percussive, or, you know, he'll understand that, or whether it's classical or orchestral or rock." Thus, Tardif and de Heer decided early in pre-production for *The Tracker* that they wanted the feel of a live band fronted by an Indigenous male singer. The result was Archie Roach performing the songs, which de Heer had penned and Tardif had composed, live at a screening of the film in the Melbourne Concert Hall as well as gongs for best score from the Film Critics Circle and the IF awards. The songs serve as an extra character, expressing the sorrow of a subjugated people, and Tardif's music positively charges the text of the screen's image.

But Tardif's scores are not guilty of simply retelling the story or redundantly repeating what the dialogue or visuals have already made clear. He illustrates his occasional intention to juxtapose conflicting emotions by referring to a scene in *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories* (2000), a film characterised by a lush, epic score performed by the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra and a 40 voice choir: "Where they were rowing back across the river after the leopard had been killed, now that was something where I think I used music against what was going on in the action to give a lot more depth to the scene, rather than just replicate what's going on in the action, to juxtapose the visuals which were quite fast paced, but the music was quite slow and glorious in a way. Rather than give a sense of the pace of the boats and the rowing it was more a sense of what the homecoming actually meant: it was an achievement and a victory but at the same time, because the death of the leopard was not something the old man had wanted to happen, it was a tragedy as well."

Alexandra's Project (2003) had a score entirely different to *The Old Man Who Read Love Stories*. Within a minimalist, synthesised soundscape, the non-diegetic music evokes a sense of tense foreboding that maps the deterioration of suburban family life. Tardif identifies this as one of his favourite works because, "unlike other films in which I had multiple tones and dynamics and instruments to work with, I wanted to push the tension with the minimum tonal range that would actually work, with the minimum palette possible, so it was probably my most experimental film." With such a spare, unobtrusive, electronic score, ambient sounds like the turn of a key in a deadlock take on an almost menacing aspect and the hyper-reality of these sounds,

amidst the relative silence, informs the audience that Steve, the beleaguered husband, is very isolated and disconnected from any outside help. The sound scenarios in Alexandra's Project transcend the traditional role of the soundtrack of merely supporting the onscreen image, but encourage deeper meanings to surface. The auditory elements of the film's metallic timbre highlight not just Steve's mental terror but also further the depiction of the suburban brick veneer house as family prison. The integration of all the aural ingredients communicates these ideas effectively, and rather than following the eye, they lead it.

In 2007, de Heer returned to Tardif to compose the score for his slapstick silent comedy, *Dr. Plonk*, which he identifies as another film-score he is proud of, "because it was 90 minutes of wall-to-wall music." Performed by Melbourne band The Stiletto Sisters, the combination of violin, piano accordion, double bass and piano is beautifully lively, and one senses this black and white homage to Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin would not have worked as well with de Heer's original idea of accompaniment by a single Wurlitzer organ, regardless of any period authenticity it may have lent. But Tardif acknowledges the expense involved in composing and recording original music for films rather than pre-recorded songs, "Whenever you go into a studio you have to be really prepared because of the cost of time - \$50,000 a day for the Adelaide Symphony orchestra - if you're not 'there' when you go into the studio you're just spending studio time rewriting and that's really counterproductive. With The Stiletto Sisters I worked with them for a week in a house, after the score had been written, I mean, we got the score right and then went into the studio for three days to do the recording."

De Heer's reliance on original music is in stark contrast to the Australian film industry's tendencies, as identified by Rebecca Coyle: "In the period from the so-called renaissance of Australian film that occurred in the 1970s, there have been two identifiable 'eras' in film music. In the first period, orchestral arrangements were frequently used [... as opposed to] the subsequent era, when Australian film followed an international tendency to include popular music in soundtracks." ("Introduction: Tuning up," *Screen Scores*, AFTRS, Sydney, 1997). But de Heer's bucking of the trend is not surprising, for as Tardif summarises: "With his combination of the sound and the music, he is an aural auteur."