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Composing Prototypical South Africans and Re-Sounding Buried Histories

Marked and Unmarked Instruments, and Musical Hierarchies in *Proteus* (2003)

CHRISTOPHER LETCHER

This article uses the 2003 Canadian-South African co-production *Proteus* to draw together a number of strands in film musicology: a consideration of music production processes, the use of indigenous musics, and the intersections of sexuality and ethnicity in musical representation. I take the film, set on Robben Island in the eighteenth century, and explore the ways its hybrid score performs a symbolic enactment of the issues raised by the film as whole: Western appropriation of indigenous knowledge, the uncovering of buried histories of interracial same-sex relationships, and the construction of new national myths. I look at the ethical implications of the film score's transnational cross-cultural music production processes; using interviews I conducted with the film's composers, I consider how 'raw' musical material from South Africa was configured in the representation of the film's proto-South Africans. I then examine how evidence of a neocolonial approach in the production of the score is undercut by the music itself. I argue that indigenous music is sounded in the film with the capacity to narrate affectively rather than merely to supply local colour or to patrol racial categories, and ultimately provides a compelling example of a score that eschews colonial forms of knowledge.

¹ Although best known for housing political prisoners including Nelson Mandela in the second half of the twentieth century, Robben Island has been a prison on and off for 300 years. Now a popular museum, the island has become an important symbol of apartheid and colonial oppression and features in a number of other films including *Goodbye Bafana* (2007) and *Invictus* (2009).

Proteus, a low-budget Canadian-South African co-production with roots in European art cinema, directed by John Greyson (Canada) and Jack Lewis (South Africa), takes as its subject an interracial, sexual relationship between two male Robben Island prisoners in the eighteenth-century Dutch Cape Colony.¹ During this period of South African history the

Cape Colony was under the administration of the Dutch East India Company (1652–1797), a period that historian Nigel Worden describes as having ‘made relatively little impact on public awareness of the South African past’ but which provided a foundation for the subsequent colonial conquest of southern Africa, and the social engineering, racism, and violence that took place under British and National Party rule (2007, p.83). While the film’s setting is Robben Island in the early eighteenth century, deliberate use of anachronisms – beehive hairdos, apartheid-era uniforms, a jeep, a radio – serves to make connections between the distant past in the Dutch Cape Colony, more recent apartheid history, and the contemporary post-apartheid period. The film’s primary themes – the colonial appropriation of the indigenous population’s land and cultural knowledge, and the unearthing of buried histories of same-sex relationships in the South African national biography – are thus intended to reverberate across South African history.

Consistent with the film’s inventive approach to the period drama, its music is an unusual hybrid, scored for modified string quartet, electric guitar, and some rarely heard indigenous South African instruments. While the indigenous instruments and musical styles on the soundtrack meet their Western counterparts on equal terms, as the second half of this article argues, the film’s end credits for the three composers (two Canadians and a South African) hint at a far less symmetrical relationship between musics:

Music by Don Pyle and Andrew Zealley
Khoisan Music by Dizu Plaatjies

This article explores the lurking power relationships in the language of the credits cited above by exploring the film’s transnational, cross-cultural musical production processes. The distinction in the ascription between two musical worlds – one all-encompassing and one ethnically specific – is significant, particularly in light of the film’s themes. The asymmetrical ‘markedness’ in the distinction implies that Plaatjies’s ‘Khoisan Music’ is something ‘other’, and certainly more narrowly defined than the more general *music* of Pyle and Zealley.²

A Theory of Markedness

I borrow the terms ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ from Robert Hatten as a way of discussing how indigenous, vaguely- or wholly-invented vernacular musical material appears as a foreign text, with a narrower range of

² ‘Khoisan’ is a unifying name for two groups of people who were among the original inhabitants of the Cape, the Khoikhoi and San.

meanings, within the context of a film's 'neutral' musical style as a whole. Hatten describes a theory of 'markedness' as dealing with 'one dimension of musical meaning, that which arises from difference [...] Difference implies opposition, but the oppositions that are characterized by markedness are typically *asymmetrical*: one term is marked (with respect to some value or feature), and the opposing term (or field) is unmarked' (2004, p.11).

From cinema's earliest days, drawing from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and American musical conventions, films have used accented or marked musical sound to distinguish particular settings or characters from those associated with comparatively unexceptional, unexotic, unmarked musical idioms. Claudia Gorbman has described how such processes operate ideologically through the role musical stereotypes have played in cinema's representations of non-Western 'others' (2000). 'Sound-tags' (Slobin, 2008, p.9) for the musical representation of 'Turks, Chinese, Scots, and generic peasants' have tended to be all-purpose and generic in the use of simple pentatonic melodies, rhythmic repetitiveness, and open fourths or fifths (Gorbman, 2000, p.236). Gorbman shows how the musical clichés for representing Native Americans in the pre-Second World War western genre emerged from popular nineteenth-century theatrical entertainments and from there were reiterated in the silent movie music anthologies produced by publishers for accompanying musicians to play from.

The two juxtaposed cues which open D. W. Griffith's silent epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) provide an early example of this kind of approach. The stereotypically marked cue Joseph Carl Breil wrote for the film's opening sequence, showing a group of African slaves arriving in America, bears little to no relation to any actual African musics. Instead, Breil makes use of a generalised exotic music to evoke primitivism and a sense of danger and fear represented by the Africans in America, contradistinguishing white and black characters through musical signs. The elaborate, goal-orientated functional harmony of the Protestant hymn-style music that follows immediately afterwards establishes a marked relationship between the musical worlds, the possibility of any actual African music displaced, replaced by a generalised stereotype.³

While stereotypical representations of Native Americans were gradually phased out of westerns during the second half of the twentieth century, replaced by more complex and sometimes sympathetic representations, as Gorbman has shown, the practice of othering with music, as well as the 'musical leveling of very disparate ethnic groups' has persisted (Slobin, 2008, p.23).

In an account of her role as an advising ethnomusicologist helping to imagine an indigenous music for the fictional Na'vi in James Cameron's

³ Even with *Birth's* egregious example it is important to not lose sight of the potential for film music to be read against the grain, for asymmetrical markers of characters' difference to be reclaimed by audiences. We might, as Anahid Kassabian notes, be encouraged by orchestral film scores to take up particular subject positions (often straight, white, and male), but audiences have agency to resist such identificatory coercion (2001). Catherine Haworth addresses the issue in relation to musical representations of sexuality and gender in her introduction to a *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* special issue (2012). See also James Buhler's argument, proposed in relation to queer theory, that we might choose to read musical representations in cinema as being less about 'reflecting power relations of the society than of signifying them' (2014, p.371).

Avatar (2009), Wanda Bryant provides an example of the endurance of such scoring strategies in contemporary film-making practice. Bryant quotes the film's producer Jon Landau's description of what composer James Horner's score was aiming for: 'to resonate traditional film sensibilities, but also to introduce a new culture [...] and to make it part of the score' (Bryant, 2012, p.3). Bryant goes on to discuss the anxieties experienced by the producers of the big-budget film regarding the use of indigenous musics. It was deemed important to create a convincing musical representation of the time, place, and culture in which the film is set (even if entirely imagined), but unusual, foreign, indigenous music – 'radical departures in musical style' – risked alienating the mass audience the producers of the big-budget film were anxious to reach (2012, p.3).

Bryant quotes Horner's justification for the way traditional film music codes and styles, 'in the interest of storytelling' and in order to 'have heart', had ultimately to take precedence over the imagined vernacular:

I couldn't go off into some weird world and present a whole new scale system or a whole new theme system; I had to try to glue everything together [...] No matter how dense it is on the screen or how alien it might be, there is a thread in the music that keeps it grounded for the audience so they know what is going on and how to feel.

(Horner cited in Bryant, 2012, p.3)

Horner's implication is that it is primarily the contemporary orchestral film music style that dominates *Avatar*'s musical soundtrack, the language of which is rooted in the late and post-Romantic idiom of the Hollywood films of the 1930s and '40s, that can ensure 'what might pass for universal comprehension of the moods, cultural associations, and genres it thus defines' (Gorbman, 2007, p.68). Certainly a century of cinematic coding of timbre, texture, harmonic progressions, rhythmic patterns, and types of melodic phrase has provided film-makers with an easy shorthand; but equally, film music has from the beginning sought to expand the range of styles and codes from which it draws to rejuvenate tired, formulaic clichés with new invention. The use of the theremin in early science fiction films, John Barry's inclusion of a Hungarian cymbalom in *The IPCress File* (Sidney Furie, 1965), Anton Karas's zither in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), Mychael Danna's use of Native American music in his score for *The Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, 1997), or more recently, Cliff Martinez's much-imitated Cristal Baschet in *Drive* (Nicolas Winding Refn, 2011) are just some examples of refreshing additions to film music's inventory. As Mark Slobin notes, the 'superculture' – his term for the framework of hegemonic, mainstream scoring conventions – 'needs variety and novelty, as well as uniformity, to survive' (2008, p.60). Like spoken language, the

⁴ ‘Tribal’ is a loaded designation in the South African context, in part because the notion of the tribe was used by the apartheid government to reinforce and artificially cultivate differences in order to turn black South Africans against each other, but also because it places the music it describes outside of modernity and presents it as an unmediated music, in a distant past, a tired trope of Africa. Grant Olwage has shown how the designations ‘tribal’ and ‘traditional’ have a long history and tended to refer to music that was not ‘something precolonially aboriginal but thoroughly entangled in the process and practices of modernity’ (2008, pp.37–38). It was part of a discourse of defining an ethnic subject ‘for capitalist interests, for ethnicity was crucial to the migrant labour system that characterised early industrial South Africa’ (Olwage, 2008, p.36).

⁵ Barry’s *Zulu* (1964) score is interesting in this context; the British soldiers are provided with the specially composed orchestral underscore, inviting audiences to take up identification positions in relation to them, while the Zulus are effectively marked as ‘other’ in having no empathetic nondiegetic score.

language of film music can be seen as a work in progress, an accumulation of shifting meanings over time; it develops its various meanings by making leaps as well as obvious connections to previous films. Horner’s comments, however, appear to be mobilising a common-sense argument with the aim of shutting the doors to any further migrant musical idioms.

Horner’s approach is one that persists in contemporary representations of South Africa, most recently in the big-budget biopic *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (2013). In a recent interview, the film’s British composer, Alex Heffes, discussed the division on the soundtrack between ‘local’ music and a more generic orchestral film music:

I went to South Africa and recorded tribal instruments, percussion, flute, that could be the musical backdrop to [Mandela’s] early years in the villages, and then when he has his second wedding with Winnie, then the music becomes a little more orchestral as he has the romance with Winnie and then it gets a little bit more thriller-like as he’s on the run. My aim was for the music to guide the audience through this emotional journey [...] The score starts sparsely using African instruments and becomes more orchestral as the story darkens.

(Heffes interviewed in Stone, 2013)

Heffes implies that ‘tribal instruments’ lack the coded universalising signifiers that would work for romantic or thriller-like sequences, but are good for setting the local scene.⁴ A brief analysis of Heffes’s score reveals it to be operating along similar lines to the supercultural approach discussed above, taking the form of lush, John Barry-esque orchestral music, with the addition of chiming guitar chords, presented as a kind of universalised value, a colonising force in the represented space of the film, the West confronting and controlling the music it marks as ‘other’, effacing and replacing the indigenous music in just the way Slobin describes the musical operations in Max Steiner’s classical Hollywood scores.⁵ In *Long Walk to Freedom*, once the scene has been set, South African music is estranged from the rest of the soundtrack.

Questions raised by Heffes’s comments above are pertinent for this study, and are not often or easily addressed. How do you create scores that neither set up asymmetrical relationships between marked and unmarked styles nor efface local musical signifiers, but which can still narrate in terms of a generally accepted semiotic film music system? How can music that may be unfamiliar to audiences, in a language that has not yet been cinematically codified, be an efficient interpretative guide in relation to the film’s context and characters?

David Burnand and Benedict Sarnaker address such questions in their paper ‘The Articulation of National Identity through Film Music’, and

argue that composers should err on the side of supercultural convention; too much focus on authenticity:

limits the opportunities to have [...] music interact with the film with any dramatic potency [...] Although we may be able to get by in a foreign language, our range of understanding is inevitably limited by unfamiliarity. We miss the nuances and inflections that provide deeper levels of meaning [...] Steiner's ability to conjure up the impression of a place one moment, and emphasise dramatic action or make symbolic musical gestures the next, was already a convention in 1942, but is one that works even today.

(1999, p.10)

In this article I take issue with such views, arguing that film music need not be an inherently neocolonial medium. *Proteus* provides an example of a representational approach that eschews musical hierarchies between Western instrumentation and film music styles on one hand, and indigenous idioms and instrumentation on the other. At the same time, the indigenous and Western styles of nondiegetic music have an equally strong sense of narrative agency, providing narrative clues, mood, a sense of time and place, and identification positioning.

***Proteus*: An Introduction**

The film takes as its starting point a surviving court transcript housed in the Cape Town archives that details the trial for sodomy of the Khoi man Claas Blank and the Dutch sailor Rijkhart Jacobsz, who met while both were serving long-term sentences on Robben Island, and who, after being found guilty, were executed by drowning in Table Bay in 1735. The film covers the ten years preceding their executions, and imagines the story of the two prisoners' developing emotional and sexual relationship within the context of the enslavement, destruction, and dispossession of the Khoikhoi, early southern African pastoralists who were the first native people to come into contact with Dutch settlers in the mid-seventeenth century (Ross, 2008, p.23). The film shows how the prison authorities were aware of and accepted the men's relationship for ten years before the trial, when, according to Jack Lewis, a 'homosexual panic' swept through the Netherlands, leading to a crackdown both in the metropole and its peripheral colonies (Ben-Asher, 2005, p.439).

The film-makers make deliberate and satirical use of anachronisms in order to suggest connections between the distant past, more recent history, and the present. Prolepses in the film include references to early 1960s apartheid South Africa, when Mandela was convicted and

imprisoned on Robben Island. These include court stenographers with 1960s hairstyles, Land Rovers, typewriters, plastic bags, the contemporary Cape Town cityscape, and a transistor radio – playing a Mozart clarinet concerto, two decades before Mozart was born (01:09:15). We are also shown iconic visual references of twentieth-century Robben Island, such as shots of the prison buildings and a concrete water reservoir, prisoners being forced to chisel rocks from the quarry, and being tortured by guards in apartheid-era police uniforms. The location of the present in the past is also alluded to in a visual reference to another island prison, Guantánamo Bay detention camp, established on Cuba in 2002 to incarcerate prisoners of the US ‘War on Terror’. In a roundtable discussion of *Proteus*, Greyson said: ‘Often in fiction films, it is the past that haunts the present-day narrative. In this case, we wanted the present to haunt the colonial past, with material ghosts from living memory interrupting and problematising this account of Claas and Rijkhaart in 1735’ (cited in Ben-Asher, 2005, p.452).

The film seeks to draw parallels between the early Cape colony in the eighteenth century and the kinds of oppression apartheid represented, including homophobia and racism, which the film suggests have not been relegated to the distant past. In its use of anachronisms, and its conscious attempt (at times) to break a sense of realism, the film should be seen in the context of the New Queer Cinema movement, in which Greyson is a pivotal figure. Distinguishing characteristics of New Queer Cinema include a rejection of mainstream conventions, intense political engagement, and aesthetic innovations – all of which are evident in *Proteus*.⁶

⁶ See Jack Curtis Dubowsky’s ‘Musical Cachet in New Queer Cinema’ (2014), a fascinating ‘triangulation’ of budget, ‘cachet’, and efficacy in placing licenced music in niche-market cinema, with a particular focus on Gregg Araki’s *The Living End* (1992).

Musical Personnel and the Film’s Production Process

Canadian composers Don Pyle and Andrew Zealley had both worked with Greyson on two previous productions: *The Law of Enclosures* (Greyson, 2000) and his episodes of *Queer as Folk* (2000). Pyle is a drummer and record producer, and Andrew Zealley a conservatoire-trained composer and gay activist. Dizu Plaatjies is a South African multi-instrumentalist and founding member of the band Amampondo. He is regularly called on by film-makers because of his wide knowledge of southern African musical traditions, including those that have all but died out or are continued by just a few practitioners.⁷

⁷ Plaatjies’s contributions can be heard in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (2013).

Pyle and Zealley, based in Toronto, started work on the film at an earlier stage of the production process than is common, at first developing musical ideas working from the script and initial discussions with the directors (primarily with Greyson), and later gaining ‘access to

rough footage as it came through the pipe'. As Zealley told me in an interview, 'With Greyson it is often the best-case-scenario [...] working with script and rough footage versus being handed a finished picture and having to score it'.⁸ Zealley said during this period Greyson was travelling regularly between Cape Town and Toronto, but that he and Pyle would 'have regular meetings with him when he was in Toronto, to play sketches and provide audio files to take back to South Africa to share with the folks there'. Zealley describes the basic inventory of musical sounds he formulated with Pyle and the directors as follows: 'The basic palette was organised as: indigenous sounds and instrumentation; string quartet (an affordable means to represent the colonialism of the period); sounds that would be used to represent the drowning chamber; specific character sounds and instruments'.

A more detailed itemisation, including where the music was recorded, is provided below in Figure 1.

- Violin, two violas, cello. (Recorded in Toronto.)
- Electric guitar performed by Eric Cheneaux. (Recorded in Toronto.)
- Khoisan instruments performed by Dizu Plaatjies. These include a kelp horn, mbira, *uhadi* (a Xhosa bowed instrument), kudu horns, leg rattles, and cowhide drums. (Recorded in Cape Town.)

Figure 1: Inventory of musical resources in *Proteus*

Zealley and Pyle had composed a number of sketches for the string music in the film by the time Plaatjies was brought into the project by co-director Jack Lewis, who had worked with him on a previous documentary film. Zealley and Pyle both stressed in my interviews with them that they were 'mindful' (Zealley) of issues of cross-cultural borrowing and approached the project with sensitivity. Pyle told me they were conscious of the kind of cross-cultural appropriations 1990s bands 'like Deep Forest' were engaged in:

where a Western beat was sort of slapped on [...] where you'd just like loop something and tape these two things together, whereas we were really wanting it to be more seamless and invisible and in a way kind of 'hands off'. But it was sort of 'hands off' and 'hands on' [in the end] and in a way it was really Dizu that did what were his inspirations in the moment based on these vague instructions – well some of them were vague, some of them were specific.

Pyle and Zealley never physically met with Plaatjies or, according to Pyle, 'even had a direct conversation with' him, and instead used the film's directors as intermediaries. Pyle describes the collaboration: 'So basically

⁸ I interviewed Pyle, Zealley, and Plaatjies separately for this project: Pyle over the phone (London–Toronto) on 17 March 2012, Zealley via email on 21 February 2012, and Plaatjies by telephone on 9 January 2014. Quotes from all three composers in this article come from those interviews.

through Jack Lewis we sent a series of directions and requests for things that we would hope for and they hired Dizu'. Zealley's description of the process is similar:

The audio files of Dizu Plaatjies were recorded in South Africa under the guidance of Lewis and Greyson. These tracks were given to us to work with – and we loved the opportunity to engage with the sounds and patterns. There was no discussion between Don and I and Dizu Plaatjies.

This was not disputed by Plaatjies when I interviewed him, though he struggled to remember working on the film and said he had never seen it. He did say, however, that it was likely to have proceeded along the lines of other collaborative film music recording projects he had been involved in, which were, he says, 'a mixture of them saying "we've got these parts, it goes like this, can you create music out of that?" and me coming up with my own ideas'.

Pyle, in answer to a question about how the recording session with Plaatjies worked, said that he and Zealley sent demo, 'synthesised' versions of some of the string music to the studio:

Basically the sequenced versions of those things – and a lot of those things would really be more for him to hear what was going on rather than to react to as a musician because those elements were quite separate and it was really a process of exploration and working with the various musical elements to find a way to bring them together. So in some ways I think [...] some of the problems that exist with working with indigenous cultures that are not your own certainly existed in our production as well, because, as I said, we were not present for all those things and a way for us to be able to work with indigenous sounds from South Africa was for someone who really knew it to actually do those parts – not for us to do those parts. But things get kind of blurred because we were asking for things like sixteen bars of something like this with this tempo and with this feel, and we might send a short piece of audio that would indicate some kind of a rhythm or some kind of a progression to happen [...] it was just 'do this based on this key, this rhythm'.

Pyle said all his instructions were 'going through the filter of Jack Lewis', who directed Plaatjies in terms of 'the mood of the film'. Pyle said they had very little knowledge of the kinds of instrument Plaatjies was using, so were not able to offer much direction: 'Even the instruments were instruments we were mostly unfamiliar with – as much as we might have been familiar with their sound, [with] some of them it wasn't until we saw it on paper that we knew the actual name of the instruments being used'.

I also asked Pyle whether Plaatjies was provided with an edit of the film in the studio while recording his parts: ‘Actually we don’t really know that, they were in South Africa and [Plaatjies] certainly was connected to Jack Lewis, and he had worked with Jack Lewis previously and we don’t really know what he was seeing there’. When I asked Plaatjies if he had any visual material to work with he said he could not remember, but thought he was most likely not working with video.

Once the recordings of the indigenous instruments had been completed, they were sent to Toronto to be worked into the score by Pyle and Zealley, who approached the score in a similar way to those they had worked on together for previous projects, ‘which was basically to use it as raw material and to reconstruct it into something that would fit the agenda of the film which was this very sort of uncomfortable union of different cultures and the approaches of different cultures’.

Pyle went on to describe how the ‘raw material’ from South Africa was worked into the score:

So we basically resampled and re-edited everything we received, so none of the performances you hear from the South African musicians are as they were in their raw form [...] we wanted it to be invisible, for it to sound like a performance, not like an edited loop and so it was very, very time-consuming because not only do you have to become familiar with the actual performance as it was delivered to you, but you have to find a way to turn it into something more linear which is some of those musical pieces with the strings – they had to be kind of more linear because ultimately their goal is to support the film [...] I edited a lot of small pieces of drum performances and kelp horn to make that conform to a rhythm that [Plaatjies was] not exactly playing [...] we edited that into a performance and then once that was strong enough to stand on its own with just a drum and a kelp horn and nothing else, then the strings were written around what the result was of what we received from Dizu.

Pyle here describes a process that does not sound particularly ‘hands off’, as he himself acknowledged.⁹ The material Plaatjies recorded was assessed and sifted by Pyle and Zealley and rearranged in Logic, the software element of their digital audio workstation (DAW), at least partly destroying the integrity of Plaatjies’s performance and conforming the audio files according to Pyle and Zealley’s taste. The Canadian composers did no pitch shifting of the material, and the digital manipulation involved only selecting, cutting, and positioning sections of audio from Plaatjies’s recordings and arranging them in the DAW timeline – sometimes, ‘basically composing a melodic progression out of something that did not have a melodic progression. The kelp horn, for example, is

⁹ In the sense that the Canadian composers placed Plaatjies’s material in the musical frame, almost like elements of a collage, rather than attempt to ‘compose’ with it, Zealley’s ‘hands off’ description feels right: Pyle and Zealley were one stage removed from the creation of the Plaatjies material.

something that now jumps out in my memory as an example of that' (Pyle). For Zealley:

The audio files by Dizu Plaatjies were so rich with sound and character and we used them expansively in the score. They enabled us to really deliver something aesthetically integral to the cultural setting. As well, they complied with our studio ethic of creating original samples vs sourced or stock sound samples.

Zealley and Pyle's working practice may have satisfied their studio ethic, but I wondered what Plaatjies thought about the process, which transferred all creative agency to the Canadian composers in controlling the 'raw material' they manipulated. Plaatjies answered my question elliptically:

You know I'm playing many different instruments from sub-Saharan Africa and at times they [film-makers/directors/composers from abroad] would like to get something different for the mood, you know, for a particular part of the feeling of the film which they would use so you know that's where my speciality comes in.

Plaatjies did, however, say that he would like the flow of collaborations with Western composers to run in the other direction:

This music that I'm playing is not music that brings a lot of millions like pop, rock, and so on. It takes a bit of time. But at the same time, I don't want to lose my roots. I can use different elements when I'm doing collaborations with other people – to be honest, I would love to do a collaboration that went the other way – at times things come like that, you know.

Plaatjies proceeded to tell me of a collaboration he had found highly satisfactory with an orchestra in Johannesburg, where the orchestra improvised on the basis of Plaatjies's composed material and where the orchestra 'tuned to the pitch and tone of my instruments. That was amazing. People couldn't believe it'. In terms of creative authority, the collaboration Plaatjies described was one that operated far more on *his* terms.

The approach of Pyle and Zealley as Western composers working with non-Western audio 'raw material' is not restricted to film music, and David Hesmondhalgh's critique of a similar kind of collaboration (the sampling of non-Western cultures by acts on the Nation record label in the 1990s) is one that has been voiced regularly in relation to cross-cultural borrowing. Hesmondhalgh argues that:

racial inequality continues to make its consequences felt in cultural production. The well-intentioned uses of sampling among some Nation

acts were politically problematic in terms of how non-Western sounds were represented in the texts; and the authorship of the musicians sampled was often erased [...] Exoticist discourses and visual representations added insult to injury.

(2000, p.300)

However, another Canadian film composer who also works extensively with non-Western musics says we should not always be so quick to sound the cultural imperialist alarm. In a detailed investigation of Mychael Danna's aesthetic and production process, Miguel Mera (2007) raises some of the same issues around cross-cultural borrowing which I raise here.¹⁰ In a discussion of Danna's approach to cross-cultural collaboration, Mera argues that the 'potential for musical representation of otherness, dislocation, exoticism, and identity as well as geographical location is a powerful dramatic and narrative tool' for composers (Mera, 2007, p.27), and that we should not be too quick to paint 'every creative musician with the same sweatshop-exploitation brush regardless of content or context' (p.30); or, as Born and Hesmondhalgh put it, we should resist 'the tendency to read domination and subsumption into any and all music appropriation' (2000, p.41).¹¹

Mera describes Danna's use of 'world music' in his scores as always operating within a 'conceptual framework', and always with was rigorous justification (2007, p.19). While Danna does not argue for authenticity in the use of non-Western music by Western composers, he does advocate operating from a position of knowledge: 'If you're going to stretch the boundaries or bend the rules, you should know that you're doing that. As opposed to doing it by accident' (cited in Mera, 2007, p.29).

If part of Danna's conceptual framework for the use of 'other' music involves 'complete immersion in the music and traditions of other civilizations', the same cannot be said of the approach of Pyle and Zealley to their manipulation of the Plaatjies recordings. However, as my analysis below attempts to show, the use of music in the film tells a different story, revealing a score that eschews stereotypes and operates with a far more equitable balance of 'Western' to 'indigenous' elements than might be expected from a consideration of the production process. While creative agency in the production of the score was undoubtedly taken away from Plaatjies once his session was over, the sounds on the soundtrack themselves tell a more complex tale.

¹⁰ Some examples of Danna's use of non-Western musics in his film scores include using Native American instruments and musicians in his score for *The Ice Storm* (1997), and hybrid Indian-Western music in *The Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012) and *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, 2001), amongst many others. shots/shot sequences.

¹¹ For two non cinema-related but South African-focused studies of cross-cultural appropriation see Timothy Taylor's exploration of Kevin Volans's music (1995) and Charles Hamm's discussion of Paul Simon's *Graceland* (1989).

¹² A mass-produced plastic tube around 65 cm in length producing an intense, roughly B \flat note, most commonly heard at South African football matches, and, since the World Cup in 2010, a staple of airport curio shops.

¹³ The kelp horn is no longer generally used as an instrument in South Africa; however, other kinds of natural horns – *kudu* horns, for example – are a feature of a number of musical traditions in South Africa, including amongst the Venda. The kelp horn is still used by Cape whale criers and fisherman announcing the arrival of a run of a South African fish called *snoek*.

Analysis

Proteus begins with the sound of a lightly thumbed, phase-effected electric guitar strumming an insistent G minor chord over sparse hand percussion. It is joined by the film's most distinctive sound – and one highly unusual in cinema – a kelp horn: a dried piece of seaweed played like a bugle or a natural horn (or indeed a *wuwuzela*)¹² by modulating lip tension to produce an array of notes in the harmonic series.¹³ At first we hear just two cracked pitches – roughly a G falling to the D below – that herald, like a broken fanfare, the film's first images: shots of the 1735 handwritten court record from the Cape Town archives from which the events depicted in the film are imagined. These images are interspersed with those of proteas, a type of *fynbos* plant with a distinctive flower that gives the film its name. Found in the southwestern and southern parts of South Africa, proteas are able to survive wild fires, after which they produce new growth. In these opening shots we are shown time-lapse images of the flowers opening after fire and rain. By this point the kelp horn's initial phrase has been imitated by the string quartet – a kind of call-and-response, with the precisely pitched and timed strings (playing a G falling to a D, in octaves, on the beat) entering in imitation of the wonky, straining, loosely timed, but richly emotive horn notes. These first ten seconds of the film set up a relationship on the soundtrack that is developed over the course of the film.

'Indigenous' Instrumentation

While the film's use of anachronisms might suggest that the film-makers were not interested in a period score, the kelp horn *is* an instrument that appears in the historical record from the eighteenth century and there is evidence in early European accounts to justify the kelp horn's inclusion in *Proteus*'s score on purely historical terms, even if one cannot know what music an eighteenth-century practitioner would have made on it. A 'trumpet' made of seaweed is mentioned by Carl Thunberg in *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope, 1772–1775*: on New Year's Day 1773, on the seashore below the mountains at Hottentots Holland Kloof, east of Cape Town, Thunberg wrote, 'Here we found thrown up by the surge, the Trumpet-grass, in which they blew like a trumpet' (1795, p.218). Some time later, in the early nineteenth century, William Burchell described finding, below Lion's Head in Cape Town:

little groves of a very large kind of seaweed, *Fucus buccinalis*, growing in the sea under water [...] the Dutch call this plant *Zee bambos* (sea-bamboo), and boys, after cutting its stalk to a convenient length

when dry, sometimes amuse themselves in blowing it as a horn or trumpet, but the sound thus produced is very hollow and dull.

(1822, p.28)

The kelp horn's use in *Proteus* at first sounds wrong and unintended: a jarring, foreign body on the soundtrack, strongly *heard* in a way that works against the principles of classical film scoring outlined by Gorbman (1987, p.87). But the kelp horn is a recurring aural motif in the film, and the strangeness of the sound soon recedes. It does not, however, function quite like a *leitmotif*, and is not associated with a single person or idea. The film makes an association at certain points between the sound of the kelp horn and Claas Blank's Khoikhoi background. In a scene that develops the film's theme of the appropriation of indigenous culture by the West, Claas is shown answering botanist Virgil Niven's questions about indigenous plants and Khoikhoi folklore. Claas's answers are intercut with a flashback to Claas's mother telling the young boy a folk story, 'The Legend of the King's Sugarbush'. The subtitled Khoi dialogue spoken by Claas's mother is at odds with the English translation which Claas offers Virgil – he is clearly acting as a subversive informant, providing inaccurate information. We hear the kelp horn and various plucked sounds on the soundtrack the moment the flashback begins. Strings join in later in this cue, as does the sound of *uhadi*, a bowed Xhosa instrument with a gourd resonator attached near the lower end that Andrew Tracey suggests originated among the original inhabitants of the Cape (the Khoikhoi and San) before being adopted by Nguni tribes (Xhosa, Zulu, Venda, amongst others) (2005, pp.239–240; see also Rycroft, 1975–76, p.60). Here Dizu Plaatjies strikes the metallic string with a small stick, creating an open, low metallic percussive pitched note which he varies by playing with the overtones produced by the gourd, moving it closer or further away from his chest.

But the function of indigenous southern African instruments and music in the film is not simply to mark out an indigenous identity, or to signal Claas's point of view. Significantly, they also feature prominently in representations of the men's developing relationship, an association I examine below after a discussion of the film's use of the string quartet.

String Quartet

Zealley and Pyle's modified string quartet produces a particular sound with particular signifying properties. It is a chamber music string sound, the individual voices more exposed, rawer than the 'warm bath', saturated sound of the string section of a symphony orchestra more commonly used in mainstream film scores.¹⁴ As Kathleen Vernon and Cliff Eisen write in

¹⁴ In this the string quartet music is closer to European art cinema in terms of scoring practice. In terms of sound, if not musical style, Jean-Luc Godard's *Prénom Carmen* (1983) uses a string quartet (playing Beethoven quartets) both diegetically and as part of a nondiegetic underscore. *Proteus*'s score also recalls the string quartet music in Gaston Kaboré's *Wend Kuuni* (1982), composed by René Guirra.

relation to Alberto Iglesias's music in Pedro Almodóvar's films, the string quartet 'evokes a sense of contained intimacy: traditionally, the quartet, partly because of the clarity of each individual line, is understood to be the most personal and intimate of genres. It provides a glimpse into the private world of the composer' (2006, p.53). Or, in the case of *Proteus*, into the lives of the film's lovers. Zealley and Pyle's modification to the standard quartet, using two violas instead of two violins, creates a darker, thicker texture than would normally be produced by a string quartet. The strings are also recorded and mixed 'dry' in terms of reverberation, and the music is often either extremely static harmonically, or cyclical with non-functional shifts in key centre (see transcription below in Figure 2).¹⁵ The strings make only the occasional gesture towards the phrasing and ornamentation of the late baroque/early classical period during which the film is set (see for example 00:49:00, when Virgil returns to Europe). For Zealley, the intention with the string quartet and the music composed for it was 'to convey the polish of the social ideal but the limitations of the physical environment' of Robben Island as 'a means to suggest the period and the setting – colonial aspirations placed in a remote landscape'. Zealley considered the coloniser's music on Robben Island to be intentionally 'rough-cut and primitive'. This could perhaps be taken to mean that civilised European culture has here been debased by recontextualisation in the barbaric colonies, but an investigation of the workings of music in the context of the film and the other sounds on the musical soundtrack reveals a less regressive reading, turning on its head the Steiner supercultural approach to representing other cultures. The usual signifiers of Western rationalism carried into film by functional harmony, by the symphony orchestra and its implicit hierarchies, have here been extracted, the music 'de-cultured' and de-Westernised, replaced with static, repetitive, non-goal-orientated harmonies, challenging the usual ideas of cultural difference.

I use the above broad discussion of the signifying properties of the different types of music and instrumentation in the film as a basis for a discussion of an important function of *Proteus*'s score: as a representation of the developing emotional and sexual relationship between the two prisoners.

Representation of the Men's Relationship

Claas and Rijkhart's first sexual encounter takes place at the anachronistic water reservoir on the island. The two prisoners smoke a bottleneck of *dagga* (cannabis) and are idly chatting, their initially fractious relationship now having thawed somewhat. Claas talks of his dreams of escape from the island as the same guitar (in G minor and pulsing at the same 125

¹⁵ The strings in the first music cue, which lasts nearly five minutes, move away from the G-minor tonal centre just once, a shift to the dominant at around 00:04:00, though the guitar underneath does not budge, and the strings return to the tonic immediately afterwards. Zealley and Pyle did, however, write non-diatonic pitches for the strings (e.g. C#) over the G-minor drone [see around 00:04:30] but the harmonic centre remains unrelentingly static.

beats per minute as the music at the beginning of the film) creeps in languidly followed by notes on the kelp horn – now a high D followed by a high, choked F, a minor-7th above the G root, that falls back down to the D. It is a bold and expressive musical gesture – distinctly not *underscore* so much as music to occupy the forefront of our attention. The music becomes fuller, gradually, as the men move closer and start to make love – percussion enters, then strings (long notes, an A sounding a yearning 9th against the static G minor drone), the expressive kelp horn, and six notes on an *mbira*. There is urgency, too, in the expanding, insistent rhythm, hinting at the danger to come in the men's actions (and we are shown they are being spied upon by Virgil). It is a compelling mix, the music neither indigenous nor European, creating a kind of slow-moving tension, but a sense of beauty too.¹⁶

The next significant love scene is scored very differently. The cue, called 'The Necklace' on the CD recording of the film's music I received from Pyle, is scored for the string quartet on its own. It is polyphonic in texture and has a different harmonic approach to the harmonically static cue described above. Here the music oscillates between two unrelated key centres, F#-minor and G-minor, without modulating. The semitone here is significant, a fairly distant relationship between keys in terms of European functional harmony, further de-culturing the European strings. The semitone could also evoke associations with Nguni bow-influenced harmony: while Xhosa bow music is structured on the movement between two fundamental notes a whole tone apart, the difference in Zulu bow (*ughubu*) music is commonly a semitone (Tracey, 2005, p.239). The music in the scene has more forward drive in the restless, interweaving melodic lines than the cue discussed above, but it is cyclical in nature (see transcription, Figure 2). The men's relationship is developing in emotional closeness and passion. There is no sense of a marked indigeneity here. Aside from the 'Western' instrumentation, the (modified) string quartet music is shorn of conventional signifiers of 'Europe': the two key centres are unrelated in terms of functional harmony, and a world away from the goal-orientated harmony of a colonial-period score. If the individual string lines might hint at baroque polyphony, the cyclical, repetitive form propels us away from reading it as such. If the *cantabile* viola melody gestures at more traditional 'romantic' scoring norms for love scenes, it is no more than a hint. Rather than narrating from a European point of audition, the music seems deliberately geographically/culturally non-specific.

Miguel Mera's 'Outing the Score', an exploration of the use of music in representations of same-sex sexual relationships in cinema, written from the perspective of a scholar composer, usefully categorises a number of approaches. One, evinced in the film *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005),

¹⁶ If the discussion here of 'European' vs 'indigenous' musical characteristics risks falling into an essentialist trap – of regarding the different kinds of music as monolithic and immutable – it is because, in the pragmatic sense in which a composer in a film music production context has to operate, a recognition of the differences between Khoisan music, for example, and a more generic 'Western' music *is* important, and gives film music the capacity to make use of distinctive signifying energies.

$\text{♩} = 104$

The image displays a musical score for a section of the cue 'The Necklace' from the film *Proteus*. The score is arranged for Violin, Viola, and Violoncello. It begins with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 104$. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into three systems, with measure numbers 8, 15, and 22 marked at the beginning of each system. The Violin part starts with a *mf* dynamic and features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Viola part also starts with a *mf* dynamic and provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The Violoncello part starts with a *mf* dynamic and plays a steady eighth-note pattern. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings like *pizz.* and *f*.

Figure 2: A section of the cue 'The Necklace' from *Proteus* (from 00:55:02).
Transcribed by the author.

is characterised by the absence of music: Lee's presentation of the first sexual encounter between the men lacks a musical underscore. As Mera comments, the men's relationship has not yet 'earned the emotional validation that music would provide', and as a consequence the film is unable 'to emotionalise the actual act' (2012, p.107). An equivalent heterosexual scene, Mera argues, would have music 'to demonstrate emotional depth between characters', with music providing a kind of emotional and physical compensation for cinema's inability to engage us tactilely (p.99). Mera's argument – that 'in *Brokeback Mountain* [...] we see but do not hear emotional depth in relation to gay sex; the filmmakers do not seek to engage us with tactile music' – certainly holds for the film's first sex scene between the men. However, further scenes of sexual intimacy (perhaps once the characters have 'earned' the emotional validation) are scored. Composer Gustavo Santaolalla's music provides these scenes with sympathetic acoustic guitar music in an easy listening folky/country idiom which might be read as an attempt by the film-makers to 'heteronormalise' the men's relationship, to refashion it in terms of straight relationships; something that, I argue below, *Proteus's* score does not attempt.

In a second, more problematic approach cited by Mera, the representation of homosexual sex in *Wilde* (Brian Gilbert, 1997) is consistently represented by music in the film as dangerous, threatening, and destabilising (2012, p.99). Mera describes his own score for *Little Ashes* (Paul Morrison, 2008) as a conscious attempt to present the sexual relationship between artist Salvador Dalí and poet Federico García Lorca as an accessible love story for a mainstream audience; the sequence of the men's first kiss is presented by Mera's music as a moment of beauty and thus narrates homosexuality as beautiful, not as an 'unstable, deviant, or perverse alternative to the fixed norm of heterosexuality' (2012, p.93).

Music in the representations of sexual scenes between the men in *Proteus* functions in some respects along similar lines to Mera's approach in scoring *Little Ashes*: to emotionalise and narrate sympathetically, to universalise, to invite audience identification, and to 'authorize the presence of the audience' in intimate scenes (Buhler & Neumeyer, 2014, p.31). However, it does so without sentimentalising the relationship, or 'homonormalising'¹⁷ it with the kind of music that cinema has long associated with romantic heterosexual couples. *Proteus's* score finds new ways to represent the same-sex relationship that is more complex and reflexive, involved in negotiations between two musical worlds (Africa and Europe), challenging binaries and disturbing supercultural assumptions. Significantly, the men's relationship is not strongly marked ethnographically and there is no sense of the music narrating the relationship from either man's perspective.¹⁸

A pivotal scene between the men comes once the new homophobic

¹⁷ For Lisa Duggan, homonormativity is the replication in gay culture of domestic, consumerist, and apolitical aspects of mainstream heterosexual lifestyles: 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2002, p.179).

¹⁸ The film's musical construction of Claas and Rijkhart's subjectivities and cultural identities stands in marked contrast to the examples of musical representation of homosexuality on screen in Catherine Haworth catalogues (2012). In *Diamonds Are Forever* (Guy Hamilton, 1971), for example, Haworth explores the musical representation of a pair of hand-holding Bond villains, Mr Wint and Mr Kidd, who also happen to be white South Africans, though they are not marked ethnographically by music. For Haworth, the chromaticism in the melody and the instrumentation (jazzy flute and saxophone) are used to characterise them aligned with stereotypes of the femme fatale: a 'double othering: Wint and Kidd are not just evil, but also effeminate'

climate in the Netherlands has reached the Cape. Soon after hearing that fears of a new ‘sodomitical pestilence’ have spread from Utrecht and Amsterdam to the ‘fair republic’, the lovers are discovered *in flagrante delicto*. The scene follows a discussion between the men on the top of the reservoir about their future. Claas will soon be eligible for release and Rijkhart says he will be free in five years. He could get a farm, Rijkhart says, and they could live together. Claas is sceptical, saying ‘they’d never let us ... they’d shoot us dead’. Rijkhart, now upset at the thought that they will not be able to have a future together despite being free men, demands that Claas define their relationship in words:

Rijkhart: ‘Say it’.

Claas: ‘What?’

‘What we have’.

‘What have we?’

‘What it is’.

‘What is it?’

‘What we are’.

‘What are we?’

‘I don’t know – what’s the name? Why can’t you say it?’

‘There is no name’.

The film never imposes a category on the men’s relationship, and Pyle, Zealley, and Plaatjies’s music similarly refuses the inclusive/exclusive categories of supercultural norms in terms of musical representation. The roles of indigenous and Western instruments are not structured by a marked/unmarked relationship, and the indigenous music is not consigned merely to supplying local colour or constructing ethnic identity. Equally, the ‘Western’ strings are not cast as the dominant force, but could be read as having been domesticated in this recontextualisation. The refusal of labels could be read as an affirmation of human complexity. It is a refusal of the othering effect of naming and categorising.

The love scene that follows is scored solely by Plaatjies’s *uhadi*, an insistent, pitched percussive music whose pitch is manipulated by Plaatjies’s positioning of the calabash resonator in relation to his chest, thus altering the overtones produced by the bow. Close inspection of the waveform of the *uhadi* recording shows that parts of the original performance (once the steady rhythm has been established) have been looped by Pyle and Zealley, and at one point Plaatjies’s *uhadi* recording is digitally overlaid on top of itself, creating a dense, disorientating texture (see Figure 3).

Pyle and Zealley add no other instrumentation save for a rattle/shaker at the very end of the cue, when the music comes to an abrupt halt as one of the other prisoners breaks in on the men shouting, ‘Ek het gesien!’

(2012, p.118) – signifiers of gender remodelled to stand for morality and sexuality. Haworth sees some limited potential for reclaiming negative stereotypical representation as ‘a signifier of resistant agency’, but this is temporary and there is never really any doubt that the duo and ‘their queer musical characterisation’ will ultimately be silenced (2012, p.119).

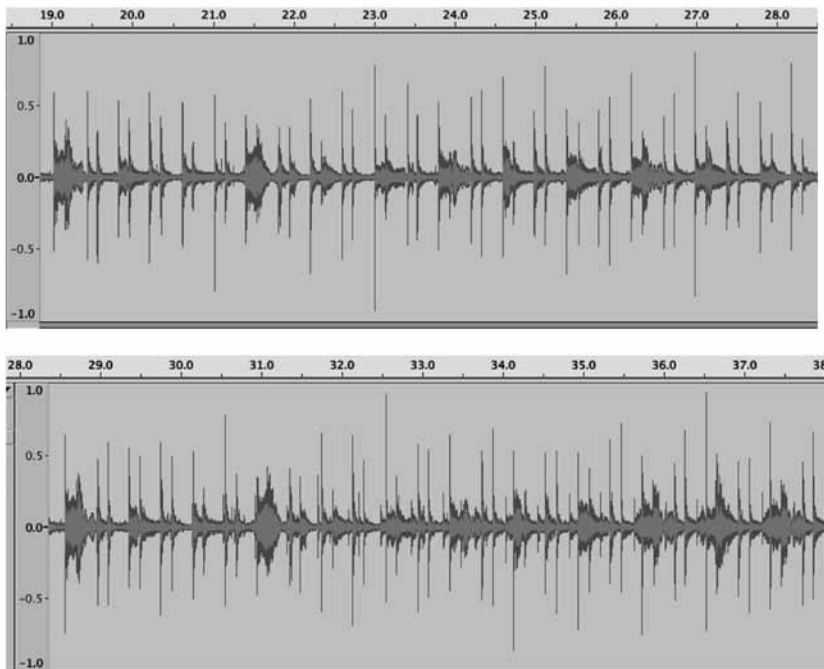


Figure 3: Waveforms of two consecutive ten-second sections of an *uhadi* cue from *Proteus*, showing how the material is looped with some minor additions (from 01:14:00). Note the similarities in the section between 19 and 22 seconds in the top sonogram, and 28 and 32 seconds in the lower.

(‘I have seen’). The driving, metallic-sounding music, with the overtones Plaatjies produces by oscillating roughly between two pitches a tri-tone apart, sets up a tense, dangerous atmosphere (see Figure 4). However, unlike Mera’s description of music in the *Wilde* scenes (‘dangerous, lascivious, and morally confusing’ for Oscar), the danger implicit in Plaatjies’s music is that of the homophobic outside world closing in on the intimacy between the two men (2012, p.99). It is likely to be read this way in light of the newspaper report we have just heard of homosexuality causing ‘monstrous panic’ in the Netherlands. Up until this point, the relationship has been presented as something beautiful and loving by the music. What is significant here is that the indigenous instrument is not relegated to the role of ethnic marker but signifies danger; it is ‘narrativising’, to use Royal S. Brown’s word (1994, p.16) and ‘emotionalising’ the scene, a role that mainstream scoring conventions tend to reserve for Western instrumentation and styles (as seen in Heffes’s comments about music for romance and thriller sequences quoted above).



Figure 4: A section of the cue ‘Cinnamon Mare’ (from 01:14:00) from *Proteus*. Transcribed by the author.

Final Scene

After the governor sentences the men – ‘to be bound together with chains and executed by drowning in Table Bay’ – they are transported on a contemporary-looking yacht out into the bay. The men stand tied together on deck, hooded;¹⁹ as Jesse Arsenault has observed, the scene enacts a kind of marriage, the men bound together by the state until parted by death (2013, p.50). It is scored with similar instrumentation to the opening: long static string lines, the harmony inert, and the straining kelp horn breaking like over-exerted vocal chords. It is elegiac in tone, but defiant, the key now resolutely D \flat major, and the horn playing (rough) fifths (D \flat to A \flat and the D \flat an octave above): both a rough ‘Last Post’, and a blessing on this final state-sanctioned joining together of the interracial same-sex couple. The kelp horn no longer sounds like a foreign body on the soundtrack but rings out a deeply felt lament for the two men. The music is free of clichés, without a trace of syrupy, mawkish signifiers of black/white hybridity. The final D \flat -major chord, disappearing under the sound of the surf, signals a kind of peace: the men finally free of colonialism’s oppression, humiliations, and brutal physical punishments.

The End Justifies the Means?

Proteus manages to avoid the stereotypical representational approaches that have afflicted the soundtracks of other films about South Africa in the post-apartheid period,²⁰ as well as representations of homosexual relationships in cinema more widely. While this is perhaps because it is a more experimental film, made on a far smaller budget, by producers potentially less anxious about alienating a mainstream audience than, for example, the producers of *Avatar*, it is exemplary for a number of reasons. First, the indigenous instruments and music are not relegated to the role of merely providing local colour but have authority in actively creating a wide range of meaning in the film. Second, the score, containing features of imagined eighteenth-century Khoisan music, as well as Xhosa and Western musical grammars, avoids setting up asymmetrical hierarchies on the musical soundtrack. Third, the film’s music suggests a way that

¹⁹ The hoods provide a visual reference to Guantánamo Bay detention camp, established during the making of *Proteus*.

²⁰ See the author’s paper on *Goodbye Bafana* (2007) in a forthcoming special edition of *Journal of Film Music*.

sounds and music that may not have been cinematically coded previously might be made to *mean* in a film.

By uncovering details of *Proteus*'s music production processes and closely analysing the resulting score, this article has sought to focus on issues of representation, identity, and the intersections of sexuality and race-ethnicity in a film made outside of the Hollywood mainstream. Questions of authority can rightly be raised around the film score's production process, which proceeds in the direction of more supercultural films in taking 'raw material' and creative agency away from the ex-colony and investing it in the West. But a close reading of the film demonstrates that the end product may in certain circumstances compensate for, if not justify, the means. The strongly heard kelp horn in *Proteus* is re-sounded with the capacity to narrate affectively – a powerful sonic metaphor for the rewriting of a more inclusive national biography, and a clarion call for a film music language that need not be rooted in colonial forms of knowledge.



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