



COVER SHEET

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The Authentic Aboriginal Voice in Rolf de Heer's 'Ten Canoes' (2006).

D. Bruno Starrs. Queensland University of Technology, 2007.

In an exhibition at the South Australian museum in February and March of 2006 entitled “Thirteen Canoes” the artwork of three generations of indigenous Ganalbingu artists was displayed. The exhibition emphasized the cultural continuum of bark painting, weaving and song from the days of Donald Thompson’s anthropological research in Arnhem Land, as evidenced by several of his 1937 black and white photographs, through to their regenerated full-color versions posed by actors (who were directly related to the subjects of Thompson’s photos) as taken by Rolf de Heer’s cameras as he shot his latest film *Ten Canoes* (2006). Part of the Adelaide Fringe Festival, the popular display was accompanied by songs from the soundtrack to the movie which were sung entirely in the Aboriginal dialect of the Ganalbingu people or other Yolngu languages, as is all diegetic dialogue spoken in the film. Both the exhibition and the film serve to elevate the status of Aboriginals and their culture by privileging Aboriginal language and storytelling. By insisting *Ten Canoes* be voiced in the Ganalbingu tongue, writer, co-director and co-producer Rolf de Heer has made a subtle statement about indigenous pride in Australia. In his film the “magpie goose people” of Arnhem Land are portrayed as empowered and in control of their language, their culture and their lives, rather than conforming with the frequent media presentation of Aboriginals as passive victims of colonial aggression, disrespect, and maltreatment. When discussing the seemingly perennial Aboriginal problems of substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment, and reduced life expectancy, the descriptor “disadvantaged” is a term that immediately springs to mind, but de Heer reminds us that it should not be used as an automatic synonym for indigenes. Identifying and addressing the causes of the woe that infiltrates the lives of many contemporary Aborigines remains important, nevertheless, one must not assume they have always been that way - or will always be so. An era of relative well-being preceding white settlement of Australia can be imagined. De Heer convincingly takes the viewer back to that time of a thousand years ago — and suggests an even earlier more rapturous Dreamtime which cameraman Ian Jones has lensed in vibrant color.

For the non-Aboriginal writer/director/producer, the starting point for *Ten Canoes* was an old black-and-white photograph of canoe-making taken by anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s, which the film’s eventual English narrator, David Gulpilil, showed de Heer there on-site in Arnhem Land; an artifact that has become part of the predominantly oral history of the Yolngu speaking people of Ramingining. With their eager participation and assistance, the film was shot on their land; in and around the Arafura Swamp in north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia in May and June, 2005, amidst crocodiles, mosquitoes, and leeches. Produced on a relatively low budget of \$AUD 2.2 million, it was funded by a syndicate consisting of the Australian Film Finance Corporation, the South Australian Film Corporation, SBS-Independent, Fandango Italy and the Adelaide Film Festival. The world premiere of *Ten Canoes* took place during the Adelaide Festival on March 19 and the film was released

nationally on June 29 through Palace Films. Following the example set by two of de Heer's earlier films (*The Quiet Room* [1996] and *Dance Me To My Song* [1997]) it was selected for official screening in the Un Certain Regard category at the 2006 Cannes International film festival, where it won the special jury prize. For many, the *Ten Canoes* outing at Cannes recalled the success of 2001 Camera D'Or winner Zacharias Kunuk's *The Fast Runner (Atanarjuat)*, which in a similar format is based on an Inuit legend featuring non-professional actors from the Canadian high Arctic and a mythic tale of murder, revenge, and shamanism, and filmed entirely in the Inuktitut language.

Ten Canoes is the 91-minute story of Dayindi, played by 17 year old Jamie Gulpilil (who is the son of David Gulpilil, the Aboriginal actor from *The Tracker* [Rolf de Heer, 2002]). Dayindi covets one of the wives of his older brother, and to teach him correct tribal protocol, the crafty older brother (Peter Minyngululu) tells his potential rival an instructive ancestral story; a tragicomic fable from the mythical past. It is a cautionary dreamtime tale of doomed love, kidnapping, sorcery, bungling misadventure and ill-directed revenge which begins seriously with David Gulpilil's voice-over narration; "Once upon a time in a land far, far away..." before he dissolves into giggles and steers the film's ten bark canoes into the mythical waters of Arnhem Land for "a story like you've never seen before."

Referring to the sound design and production in de Heer's cult hit *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf de Heer, 1993), Anna Hickey-Moody and Melissa Iocca coined a new term for his cinema-goer when they said "In de Heer's film, the viewer is primarily a listener, or aurator, and secondly a spectator." [1] Hickey-Moody and Iocca argue that in privileging the intimate noises of Bubby's existence through the use of binaural microphones and producing an intensely claustrophobic atmosphere of "gurgling, eating and pissing" [2] (ibid.), the audience is forced to identify with him and alternatively to be disgusted by him. With the listener positioned between the two microphones, i.e. virtually between Bubby's ears, he is perfectly synchronized with the protagonist's journey; the aurator hears through his left ear that which Bubby hears through his left ear. In Michel Chion's hierarchy of aural importance [3], the conventional sound model with dialogue occupying the highest, most important position, is dismantled and reversed by the binaural microphones. Diegetic sounds not normally incorporated into the audience's experience of the universe of the film become foregrounded; they are unnervingly persistent and strident. In the low stimulation environment of Bubby's mother's squalid apartment the soundtrack of Bubby's life is afforded intimate prominence. The amplified and evocative sound environment produced in *Bad Boy Bubby* recalls the experimental soundscapes of the films of Philip Brophy, which have been chronicled as "the organisation of more complex spatio-temporal relationships ... [that explore] ... methods which have the potential to extend and enrich the vocabulary of film sound and perception." [4] Indeed, understanding the significance of de Heer's use of sound requires academic attention at least equivalent to that which Anahid Kassabian has argued is given to the subject of "reading" in literary studies and "spectatorship" in film studies [5]. With a conventional soundtrack, *Bad Boy Bubby* would have an entirely different effect on its audience.

In some respects, de Heer has continued his pre-occupation with satisfying the aurator in the audience with *Ten Canoes*. Sound recordist James Currie and composer Tom Heuzenroeder sought the “best way to capture the sonic authenticity of the Arnhem Land wetlands.” [6] With what journalist Sam Oster describes as a proscenium arch look, that is, mostly wide shots, there was nowhere to place boom microphones and because the actors were virtually naked, lapel microphones were not an ideal option. Unscripted takes and a desire not to interrupt the action with battery changes and conventionally interruptive systems were also important. Oster reports that:

De Heer approached Adelaide University to produce a custom device for dialogue recording, and was put in touch with Dr. Matthew Sorell, the research director of the Convergent Communications Research Group at the university. ... [Dr. Sorell said:] “We settled on the MSI Megastick 256, which can run for about eight hours on a single AAA alkaline battery. It has enough memory (256MB) for nine hours of recording at 16kHz sampling using 4-bit ADPCM (Adaptive Differential Pulse Code Modulation), which is perfectly adequate for voice, and can also record at 48kHz if needed. They only cost about \$250 each, so we could afford to put one on each actor and have some spares.” [7]

The recording devices were hidden in the naked actor’s hair or hung from their necks in traditional pouches and synchronised to a horn sounded on the set each morning. The use of these “hair” microphones resulted in about 100 hours of sound recording per shoot day with Currie having to process about three gigabytes of information each evening. The outcome being that, as Currie, describes; “all these fragmented bits and pieces that we’d shot over the seven weeks had come together to form a shape that I’d never seen before.” [8] With its incidental music of traditional Aboriginal instruments, singing performed in Ganabingu and its Aboriginal accented voice-over by indigenous actor David Gulpilil, *Ten Canoes* recalls de Heer’s earlier subversive Western, the didactic meditation on racism that is *The Tracker* (2002). This story of an Aboriginal tracker (again played by Gulpilil), hunting a fugitive black man in the outback, who subverts the white man’s justice of a racist trooper (Gary Sweet) by hanging him with his own shackles, has an attendant air of authenticity generated by the plaintive ballads of indigenous folk singer Archie Roach. Like Roach, Gulpilil is instantly recognisable to many Australians as an Aboriginal. The authentic Aboriginality and the “alien sounds of chirrups, croaks and slithers” [9] ensured *Ten Canoes* had a soundscape quite unlike any the audience at the Cannes film festival would have heard before.

De Heer explained to *TIME Pacific* journalist Michael Fitzgerald; “People talk about, What is a white director doing making an indigenous story? But I’m not, ... They’re telling the story, largely, and I’m the mechanism by which they can.” [10] Interviewed by academic Mike Walsh, de Heer elaborated on how his respect for the Ganabingu actor’s preferences over-ruled the expected foreign market needs:

I’ve already had a discussion with the Italian distributor about how to present it because in Italy they normally dub everything and I said, “No, they cannot dub the dialogue. The actors don’t give permission.” But if we force them to put out a completely sub-titled version, it really marginalises it to small arthouses. What you do is get a good Italian

storyteller, one with a third world accent of some sort (because clearly we're not going to find someone who speaks fluent Italian with an Australian indigenous accent, nor would anybody in Italy recognize it as an Australian indigenous accent) an African-language accent for example, and you have the storyteller tell that story in that way, then you have an Italian version that would play more broadly, while it still preserves their cultural desire to have their language heard and known. [11]

Not only does the English narration by David Gulpillil, in his indigenous accent, further the effect of elevating the status of the Aboriginal culture, the storytelling technique of recounting that which is also being seen adds Aboriginal authenticity. De Heer describes the Aboriginal storytelling style as one of "cascading repetition":

For example: "See that man there, see that man sitting on a rock. Now, that man on that rock, he's thinking. He's sitting on that rock and he's thinking about something. That man, see him, thinking about. ..." There might be three concepts in a sentence, and the next sentence repeats those concepts and adds a new one. One of the original concepts might get dropped off and another one put in, but the others are always repeated, sometimes in a different order, and sometimes with a slightly different or elaborated meaning. It's a painful way of storytelling. They'll talk about something that's really obvious that we would never say because it's not part of the story. You feel that you know that, or that you don't need to know that for the story but the language is all about context and so context is emphasised and by stating something that's obvious for everyone to see, you're giving it a contextual emphasis. [12]

By privileging the Ganabingu dialogue for the actors, an indigenous accent for the English voice-over by well-known Aboriginal actor Gulpillil, and an Aboriginal style of cascading repetition narration, de Heer's film articulates as Aboriginal in three ways and serves as a rare example of cinema that elevates the marginalized Aboriginal people and their overlooked culture. Indeed, the fundamental goal of most of de Heer's films can be seen as one of providing an amplified voice for the unheard, the marginalized, the Other. As Adrian Martin has pointed out, de Heer tends to identify with "the figure of the naive visionary," [13] someone who is isolated from mainstream society. Part of the isolation de Heer's protagonists endure stems from the struggle to master spoken language. In *Bad Boy Bubby* the socially inept male protagonist mimics the phrases and gestures of those he meets as he stumbles from situation to situation, until, by repetition and sheer good luck, he achieves the zenith of societal struggle; a happy suburban family. As a protest against her warring mother and father, the little girl in *The Quiet Room* (Rolf de Heer, 1996) becomes mute. The disabled female protagonist in *Dance Me To My Song* (Rolf de Heer, 1997) can only express herself through a computerized voice-box. In *Alexandra's Project* (Rolf de Heer, 2003) the alienated wife finds a voice via her video recorder and asserts herself from her emotionally isolating husband. Sandy George, in *The Australian*, seemed to agree with Martin, stating: "His film, delivered in spite of language difficulties and extreme physical challenges, is another that gives voice to Australians who don't usually have one." [14] Despite their isolation from mainstream society, the Ramingining people have told their story eloquently, and regardless of their unfamiliarity with the English language, have continued to be heard as the press clamored for interviews; also

in *The Australian*, Nicolas Rothwell reported “Bobby Bununggurr recalls being in the canoes on set as more than acting, as being ‘full of life, the spirits are around me, the old people they with me, and I feel it, out there I was inside by myself, and I was crying.’” [15]

In 2004 music scholar Cat Hope commented, “... 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,” [16] and the same can be said of *Ten Canoes*. But with its embedded English narration, its process of bringing the non-Aboriginal viewer into a story-world that effectively empowers all the storytellers (narrator Gulpilil and the cast of mainly non-professional actors “performing” as authentic Aboriginal characters in their own Aboriginal culture and in their own Aboriginal home), questions may be asked about the extent to which empowerment of the Ganalbingu people really occurs. The colonizing white man’s language does not indicate de Heer’s underlying contempt for his subjects as he controls and moulds the narrative to his own cinematic ends. His refusal to “mute” the Ganalbingu tongue by dubbing it in English serves to further empower the vanquished Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal sounds coming from a white cameraman and white director are not problematic; *Ten Canoes* was first shown at an outdoor basketball court in Ramingining without sub-titles, much to the chagrin of the few non-Aboriginals in the audience at the time. [17] For national and international release the concession to non-Ganalbingu speaking audiences in providing English narration is not disempowering but rather is pragmatic. Unlike the heavy-handed didacticism of his earlier treatise on injustice to Aboriginals in *The Tracker*, de Heer has subtly articulated his concerns about Aboriginals in Australia today and, as the film’s success at Cannes indicates, has managed to reach a very large and appreciative audience. Rather than relying on guilt over white man’s injustice, well-placed humour engages the non-Aboriginal audiences in both the voice-over and the plot; a long running joke about the sweet tooth of one “Honey Man”, gags about men’s sexual performance and comic depictions of flatulence, all illustrate the universal humanity of the near-naked characters yet fail to detract from their dignity as pre-colonisation, non-industrial, indigenous Australians. Indeed, the mere fact *Ten Canoes* seeks to tell a dreamtime story, and not a contemporary narrative, indicates the writer/director’s respect. No other film to date focuses to the same extent on simply recounting a dreamtime legend. Other films have provided brief depictions or references, but *Ten Canoes* is the first to dedicate itself to such. Some non-indigenous directors have even invented their own “dreamtime” legends, such as Werner Herzog did with his *Where the Green Ants Dream* (1984). De Heer’s story, in contrast, is entirely authentic.

In enabling the 800 Yolngu speaking inhabitants of Ramingining to tell their own story in their own language of Ganulbingu, with Aboriginal accented English voice-over and in their own way of cascading repetition, de Heer has empowered them to the extent the social malaise of their contemporary indigenous Australians reminds us of the historically contingent acts of colonial violence responsible for such woe. Unlike the heavy-handed didacticism of his earlier treatise on injustice to Aboriginals in *The Tracker*, de Heer has subtly articulated his concerns about Aboriginals in Australia today and, as the film’s success at Cannes indicates, has managed to reach a very large and appreciative audience.

Ten Canoes is an overwhelmingly positive contribution to the cinematic articulation of the Australian Aboriginal voice.

Notes

[1] Anna C. Hickey-Moody and Melissa Iocca, "Sonic affect(s): Binaural technologies and the construction of auratorship in Rolf de Heer's *Bad Boy Bubby*", *Metro Magazine*, 140, 2004, 78.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. C. Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

[4] P. Samartzis, "Avant-garde meets mainstream: The Film Scores of Philip Brophy", *Screen Scores: Studies in Contemporary Australian Screen Music*, R. Coyle, ed. (Sydney: AFTRS, 1997), 50-51.

[5] Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identification in Hollywood Film Music*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 65.

[6] Sam Oster, "Walkie talkie", *Inside Film*, 80, Sept., 2005, 45.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Michael Fitzgerald, "Keeping time with Rolf de Heer", *TIME Pacific* (20.3.06), date of access: 23.4.06, <<http://www.time.com/time/pacific/magazine/article/0,13673,503060320-1172744,00.html>>.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Mike Walsh, "*Ten Canoes* and Rolf de Heer", *Metro*, 149, 2006, 17.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Adrian Martin, "Wanted: Art Cinema", *Cinema Papers*, December 2000, 30.

[14] Sandy George, "Storybook charm avoids guilt buttons", *The Australian*, (21.3.06), date of access: 28.5.06, <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,18537860-5001562,00.html>>.

[15] Nicolas Rothwell, "Top end tales", *The Australian - The Arts*, (27.5.06), date of access: 24.6.06, <<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,19233398-16947,00.html>>.

[16] Cat Hope, "Hearing the story: Sound design in the films of Rolf de Heer", *Senses of Cinema*, 31 (4/6.04), date of access: 24.4.06, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/31/sound_design_rolf_de_heer.html>.

[17] There are currently three versions of the film: (1) the Yolngu languages dialogue version with English narration and English subtitles; (2) the Yolngu languages dialogue and narration version with English subtitles and (3) the Yolngu language and narration version without any subtitles.