

Wolf Creek: An Unaustralian Story?

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Nor everyone fits into the Brand Australia vision of a safe wilderness populated by bland suburbanites and folksy crocodile hunters. The country's reputation as a safe location, the easy option for those who want southern heat without the attendant risks, is in danger of being transformed into something quite different (Blackden 202).

Terror Australis

The recent Australian horror film *Wolf Creek* (2005) – a first feature for director Greg McLean - became one of the surprise international film success stories of last year. First screened at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2005, *Wolf Creek* was picked up for international distribution by the Weinstein-owned Miramax/Dimension Films for \$US 3.5 million, and was released through Dimension Films in the United States on December 25, 2005. The film was based on “actual events” – in particular, two high-profile true crime stories that have haunted the popular cultural imaginary of Australian society; firstly, the Ivan Milat hitchhiker murders from the early 1990s; and secondly, the violent abduction and murder of British tourist Peter Falconio in the Northern Territory in 1996, a case only recently resolved with Bradley John Murdoch convicted for his death and sentenced to life imprisonment in Darwin on December 13, 2005.

In its brutally graphic depiction of violence, *Wolf Creek* has been placed by some film critics into a new sub-genre of horror that emphasises realistic-looking torture and documentary-like storytelling techniques, alongside other recent films such as James Wan and Leigh Whannell's *Saw* sequence (2004-6) and Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005), which in turn have been inspired by a new wave of Japanese and Korean psychological horror films such as *Ôdishon* (1999) by Takashi Miike and *Oldboy* (2003) by Park Chan Wook (Newman 30). At the same time, the film fits into a long-established tradition of the Australian gothic, which has been a present theme in European-Australian literature since the nineteenth century. In *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Delys Bird writes that the trend within colonial literature toward gothic-toned narratives was entirely in keeping with for the oftentimes violent experience of settler life, with “its potential for brutal oppression and corruption” (31-32). On celluloid as well as in literature, these themes have continued to be re-examined and reinvented for popular Australian culture, some memorable and well-known examples (from the “new wave” of Australian cinema in the 1970s) including Peter Weir's *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and George Miller's futuristic road movie *Mad Max* (1979). What these Antipodean gothic films seem to emphasise are the corrupting dangers of the alien

Australian landscape. The cultural anxiety of travelling through the forbidding and encompassing outback is dramatised in many of these films, and this anxiety crucially includes encounters with the *people* who choose to inhabit such liminal zones. The preoccupation with this theme perhaps explains why the road movie appears to be one of the privileged cinematic forms to express the Australian gothic.

Wolf Creek, like *Mad Max*, can be identified as a horror road movie. To briefly outline its narrative, it is about two British female backpackers (Liz and Kristy) who meet up with a young Sydney man (Ben) in Broome and agree to go on a road-trip through central Australia, aiming to finish in Cairns. The first key destination on their trip is the Wolf Creek National Park in outback Western Australia, to visit an ancient meteor site. Realising that their car has broken down in the car park of the reserve, the three allow an outwardly friendly passer-by Mick Taylor – a middle-aged local kangaroo shooter - to tow them to his place “back-a-ways,” to replace the broken car part. Drugged, bound and separated at his camp, they awaken to discover that Mick is a sadistic killer, and each person makes a desperate attempt to get away. Against the “final girl” horror paradigm that has served such US teenage exploitation flicks as *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Nightmare of Elm Street* (1984), the two females Kristy and Liz meet their own particularly grisly deaths at the hands of Mick (Clover 3). It is Ben, then, who is the “final girl”, as he is rescued by European tourists, and nearly dies of exposure in the process of his escape. Because Ben cannot relocate the camp with police, Mick remains unapprehended at the end of the film: the last shot shows a silhouette of the outback man melting into the wilderness.

Those familiar with the Milat and Murdoch histories would easily recognise similarities between the real life cases and the film. For example, one of the most shocking torture scenes in the film - when Mick makes Liz into a “head on a stick” by cutting into her spinal cord – is a reference to one of the more sensational revelations of the Milat trial (reportedly one of his favoured killing techniques). Spatially, however – both intra and extradiegetically - the film uses elements from the Murdoch case. The starting point of the film, Broome, is where Murdoch originally lived, and although the events in the film are set in Western Australia, the filming locations were outback places around Port Augusta, South Australia - the same place where Murdoch was arrested for the rape and robbery of two female tourists and soon after for the murder of Falconio. Then, scenes showing the roadside bravado of Mick Taylor echo the boldness of the Falconio attack. Finally, Ben’s inability to locate the murder site – and hence any real evidence to account for the disappearance of the girls - echoes the plight of Falconio’s girlfriend Joanne Lees, who was negatively and sensationally portrayed by large sections of the Australian media and who until more hard evidence was found “came to experience the double horror of being viewed as a potential murderess” (Dougary par. 4).

Utilising a documentary-like aesthetic that makes the film resemble a crime recreation TV show, *Wolf Creek* skilfully mixes its narrative with factual information to suggest that its events are plausible. One early example is an inter-title at the beginning of the film mentioning that 30,000 people are reported missing in Australia every year, that ninety

percent turn up again within two weeks, and that “some are never seen again.” Not specifying the exact number of people who disappear permanently or providing a regional breakdown of these disappearances, this ominous introduction implies that some three thousand people a year might perish in an outback hole at the hands of a madman like Mick. The presence of the tourist as naïve victim in many of Australia’s most notorious crimes in recent decades - from the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain at an Uluru campsite in 1980 to the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in 1996 – lends extra legitimacy to the film’s narrative. Indeed, such was the perceived authenticity of the narrative of *Wolf Creek*, that the defence team for Murdoch was able to postpone the release of the film in the Northern Territory until after Murdoch’s trial was resolved (ABC Online).

Another reaction to this reality effect in the news media – a reaction that forms the central basis for investigation in this paper - has been the increased concern for the negative impact that *Wolf Creek* might have on outback tourism in Australia. This following comment from a US online reviewer of the film epitomises the main view from film critics toward the film’s effect upon Australian travel:

The Australian tourism board must loathe *Wolf Creek*. The slash-and-gore thriller, which is now on DVD in both R-rated and unrated versions, offers a vision of the outback in which naïve tourists are prey for a crafty, bloodthirsty, but nevertheless picaresque native. "Come to Australia; end up on a meat hook," just does not have a welcoming ring to it (Grady par.1).

A comment such as Grady’s reveals the world-wide media’s swiftly growing recognition of the touristic effects of mainstream cinema, a phenomenon that has been called movie or film-induced tourism by researchers since the early 1990s (Riley, Baker and Van Doren 919). It indicates belief in the logic that films with positive themes inspire tourism while films with negative themes scare travellers away. Those working in the tourism industry, however, acknowledge that this is a logic that has yet to be proven: on the contrary, tourism research shows that frightening or negatively-themed films have been able to *create* travel to film locations, and not scare people away (see Riley, Baker and Van Doren 932; Beeton 24). At this point, it is difficult to draw any strong conclusions about the potency of film-induced tourism, because a successful travel-inspiring film depends on a wide range of factors, such as the availability of the location (the costs of getting to a place, the ease of travel), the way the film stylistically and narratologically makes use of travel and place, and then of course there is the matter of the box office and global success of the film – a movie that no-one sees will hardly draw a large number to its shooting locations. Then, there is the danger of underestimating the ability of the film spectator to negotiate between fiction and fact, because as Sue Beeton argues, “[p]eople tend to differentiate between fantasy and reality and are aware of the fundamental falseness of the film-making process” (Jeffrey p.4). Ultimately, movies still need to be assessed individually for their merits as tourism-inducing films.

Despite the international box office success of *Wolf Creek*, in the wake of the film, it is

still too early to gauge whether tourists are baulking at the idea of visiting the outback, although the number of international visitors to outback states in the Northern Territory and West Australia has grown in the year ending June 2006, up nine per cent on the previous year, with a good growth in American and British tourists (Bailey 2006). So, taking up this question posed by mainstream journalism, how might *Wolf Creek* impact upon the Australian tourism industry? This paper is an attempt to address this question, but rather than moving into the shaky realm of extreme conjecture about the long term economic benefits of the film, here I am more interested in examining the competing representations of tourism, tourists and national identity that are contained both *within* the film and in recent mainstream Australian tourism campaigns. In other words, in this paper I am more concerned with ideological and cultural impacts rather than economic ones. I look at the way(s) that the figure of the murderer Mick Taylor epitomises and contrasts from the stereotypical ideal of the hyper-masculine “Aussie bloke” that has been successfully commodified in the recent marketing of the nation. In particular, I shall assess the dominant touristic iconography of Tourism Australia – focussing particularly on the creation of Brand Australia and its influence on national representation from the 1980s – and the ways that *Wolf Creek* fits into this brand-image. As such a methodology might suggest, there are no simple answers to the rhetorical question that I have asked: *Wolf Creek* is a polysemous text that supports a diverse range of socio-political readings of Australian attitudes to international tourism. This complexity shall at least indicate the difficulties of accounting for this text’s real-life effect upon tourists, and more generally for other works of recent cinema lauded (or condemned) as sites for film-induced tourism.

Dead Set Legend

In 1958 Russel Ward published *The Bush Legend*, a seminal text on contemporary Australian identity that sought to analyse the figure of the “larrikin” that was used both in literature and as a way in the popular media for describing what is perceived to be an essential aspect of the Australian character. Ward saw the larrikin to be one of the central myths of recent Australian culture and suggested that the stereotype was formed during the surge of nationalist feeling in the 1880s and 1890s. More generally, it is a rural myth and describes a:

... practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others... He swears hard and consistently... and drinks deeply on occasion. Though he is 'the world's best confidence man', he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. He is a 'hard case', sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally... He is a fiercely independent person who hates officiousness and authority, especially when those qualities are embodied in military officers and policemen. Yet he is very hospitable...(2).

Across the twentieth century and beyond, this *mythos* of the larrikin or “bloke” has been a resilient one in cultural representations of both the rural and urban Australian male, whether they be rural stockmen, bushrangers, soldiers at Gallipoli or surf lifesavers, even

extended more recently (at times) to include females, indigenous peoples and immigrants. However, it was only in the 1980s that this stereotype was translated and commodified into a global tourist icon by Australian comedian Paul Hogan. Hogan made two contributions to this newer representation: firstly, by being the modern Aussie every-male of the “put another shrimp on the barbie” tourism campaign of the mid 1980s; and secondly, by starring as crocodile outback man Mick Dundee in the 1986 box-office blockbuster *Crocodile Dundee*. This film provides the most recognised example of film-induced tourism in Australia, creating a strong brand image similar to the way that *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-3) has more recently inspired a wave of travel to New Zealand. *Crocodile Dundee* was undoubtedly a major influence on the tourism industry of the Northern Territory in the 1980s and 1990s, making tours to Kakadu National Park extremely popular, especially for visitors from the United States. But this tourism was not just restricted to the top end but included the entire nation: in 1987 the tourism rate rose more quickly across Australia than in any other developed nation around the world, which has been attributed to the success of the film (O’Regan 172). Obviously, the career of Steve Irwin was also based upon the foundation of Mick Dundee as an Australian cultural icon for the United States - and Irwin helped to extend the idea of the “crocodile hunter” into the new millennium. A former tourism task force Minister John Brown has suggested in a Radio National interview that Paul Hogan’s influence on international tourism has been incalculable:

I mean, what he did by improving our image, or giving us an image - we basically didn't have one before that, we were seen as a zoo, you know, interesting marsupials and no people - and giving the world that view of Australia as a welcoming happy place and the Australian individuals as being laid back, irreverent and very happy - you couldn't estimate what that meant.

Returning to *Wolf Creek*, it is clear to see that Mick Taylor’s character is a direct descendant of the conventional, outback man epitomized by Mick Dundee. Taylor – played by John Jarratt, like Hogan well known in Australia as a popular “blokey” television personality - is friendly and affable, and entertains Kristy, Liz and Ben with stories of his carefree hunting days. A burly, middle-aged man in a stockman’s hat and a plaid shirt, Mick appears practical (providing a solution for the broken-down car), swears heavily and speaks roughly, is anti-intellectual, anti-religious and hospitable (at first). When the three first meet him, they make two explicit references to *Crocodile Dundee*: firstly, Kristy says “he’s hilarious, he’s like one of those guys from the outback Australia shows, he’s like *Crocodile Dundee* or something.” Soon after, at the camp, Ben says to Mick: “You get to cruise around the bush saying cool stuff like ‘that’s not a knife, *this* is a knife,” – the most famous phrase from *Crocodile Dundee* - a comment which appears to either offend or baffle the bushman, who stares back at Ben intently. It is because Mick Taylor appears to conform to such a safe representation of Australian identity that his sudden change to sadistic murderer seems all the more shocking. Taylor is (almost literally) Mick Dundee radically “tailored” – instead of being an ambassador for tourism, he is out to cripple the industry one person at a time. When Mick appropriates Dundee’s line as he shows his large hunting knife to Liz – “like your little mate said before...” - he

demonstrates not only his cruelty to the group but also his media literacy of the Paul Hogan image. It is as if he wants to deliberately deviate from the norm set by the earlier film(s).

Another subversion of the *Crocodile Dundee* story is Mick Taylor's contrasting attitude toward international visitors. Mick Dundee travels to Manhattan – his first time in a city - and seems able to adapt to this urban landscape and its people, eventually finding love with the American reporter Sue Charlton. On the other hand, Mick Taylor sees international people as expendable and subhuman vermin, threatening the peace of the outback with their car and bus tours. Talking to the tourists when he is still feigning friendliness, he says of his profession as kangaroo shooter: "I'm doing people a service, taking out a few roos. They're everywhere out here now... like tourists." This xenophobic attitude crudely evokes some of the conservative nationalist political parties that have emphasised isolationist policies, especially Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in the late 1990s. In other ways, Mick is shown to be conservative, particularly in his attitude toward homosexuals ("poofs" a colloquialism that has lost favour in the 1980s and 1990s, indicating Mick is out of touch), which emphasises Mick's allegiance to a traditional masculinity of the bush legend. The high-profile nature of *Wolf Creek* means that this latest twisting of the larrikin figure offers a range of critiques of this mythical figure, which is likely to impact upon Australian tourism campaigns, as we shall see in the following section.

Brand Marks

While Hogan's tourism campaign for Australia was so highly successful in the 1980s, in the last decade there have been deliberate shifts away from this ocker form of touristic promotion: partly because of consumer fatigue with the long-lived campaign; and partly because on its own it was considered to be too limiting, parochial and anti-cultural as a representation of Australia in the lead up to cosmopolitan high-profile events such as the 2000 Sydney Olympics. In 1995, the Brand Australia initiative was launched by Tourism Australia (then called the Australian Tourist Commission), which more recently in 2004 was relaunched as the \$360 million marketing campaign "Australia. A different light," a multi-faceted operation instigated after a minor slump in international tourism caused by the effects of SARS and the threat of terrorism caused by the World Trade Center attacks and the Bali bombing. The overall aim of the Brand Australia development has been to sell the nation as an experience and not just a destination, and to emphasise the putatively unique qualities of the country, from the people to the quality of the sunlight. The advertising campaign included a series of television commercials that focussed on a number of Australian cultural figures, from the singer Delta Goodrem to the poet Les Murray to Richie Benaud the ex-cricketer and Channel 9 commentator.

Wolf Creek certainly echoes some of the visual features of the recent campaigns. For example, the tourism advertisements have favoured representations of the outback – and outback people - over other locations in Australia, and the range of colourful characters that the three meet in the Australian interior contrasts with the representation of the other

self-absorbed tourists in Broome. Then, sunrise and sunset – which are shown many times in *Wolf Creek*, adding to the tension by being a temporal reminder of the horrors in wait – has been a recurring visual motif of many of the adverts. In “light” of this new tourism campaign – and because Mick plays such an evil character in this horror film – one is tempted to argue that the young tourists are punished for placing trust and belief in the older touristic representation of the bloke. In this more socio-political reading of the film, Mick is a malignant “return of the repressed” of these older touristic representations, threatening a society that is desperately trying to re-brand itself as locus of culture and sophistication. One could take this reading even further, and suggest that Mick is allegorical of the horrors of patriarchal white Australian history that marginalised females, indigenous cultures and other voices of alterity: in this sense, the larrikin is joined up to the forbidding outback, from which expanse traditionally arises “the beast” or the “crazed man” (Morris 115). Mick’s misogynistic treatment of Liz and Kristy adds grist to this argument: one is certainly more inclined to feel sympathy (and hence identify with) these younger characters rather than with the subjectivity of the sadistic white male.

Despite this more radical reading, however, it could also be argued that Mick Taylor’s anti-touristic stance re-asserts older (brand) values, particularly because there has been a re-emergence of the ocker personality in the latest Tourism Australia campaign of early 2006 (carefully timed to appear before the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in March). The provocative “where the bloody hell are you?” television commercial of 2006 generated a lot of free publicity because of the ways in which “bloody” and “hell” were censored across the world. In Britain, the Broadcast Advertising Clearance Centre ran the commercial with the word “bloody” taken out – although the advertisement was eventually run uncut. The colloquial style of this advertisement matches Mick’s harsh accent and language: for example, his first line – when he appears as friendly savior to the trapped backpackers – is “what the bloody hell are you mob doing out here?” Despite the previous attempts made by Tourism Australia to modify the international perception of the country, it appears that the larrikin stereotype shall remain for some time as a shaper of international touristic desire.

Mick’s insane personality could be read in two quite different ways, each with different outcomes for the potential effect that they might have on the touristic consciousness. Firstly, because he deviates so radically from the bush legend *mythos* by being a nightmarish and horrible figure, he can be considered its antithesis. Secondly, however, Mick might add a renewed sense of *authenticity* to the brand image, and this sense of reality is still an important part of the creation of tourism. It could be that the sense of danger that is associated with Mick is a vital part of this illusion of reality. By becoming an internationally successful star figure, the original Mick Dundee had symbolically sold out his bush ethos: by contrast, in slicing up tourists and defying what he is supposed to represent, Mick Taylor retains a certain level of credibility and authenticity, and he has the glamour of danger which has been identified as an important aspect of the touristic imaginary. In his article “Tourists, terrorists, death and value,” Phipps argues that the “threat of death and danger is something that tourism relishes so as to retain its imaginative power as a space for reconnection with the ‘real’ which remains so

elusive...”(83). To an extent, this dialectical relationship between danger and tourism is indicated in the way that war zone countries often turn into popular travel locations as soon as they are safe again. Looking at the current promotional material offered by Brand Australia is currently selling the nation as a dynamic location with attendant risks, the “Where the bloody hell are you?” campaign makes references to the country’s wildness and its wild animals, such as sharks. This is perhaps in order to attract a particular niche of traveller that has been identified as searching for more adventure and independent experiences than those provided by mass tourism: backpackers. The backpacker is of course typified by each of the young travellers in the film, particularly with the large influx of young travellers from the UK, which Kristy and Liz represent. The connection between danger and the touristic imaginary might suggest that horror films might after all inspire fantasies of travel and habitation, and so we must add another layer of complexity to this text.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the character of Mick Taylor functions as an ambiguous figure in the national touristic imaginary - in some ways he is a kind of evil *doppelgänger* to the larrikin Mick Dundee/Paul Hogan/Steve Irwin stereotype, yet in vital ways he might just represent the ongoing survival of this *mythos*. This kind of paradox might be precisely the kind of cultural appropriation that Tourism Australia depends upon in order to preserve the symbolic value of the brand – for the present moment, at least. As I have tried to show, the relationship between a cultural production such as *Wolf Creek* and with real life tourism is a complex one. Some issues that I have not addressed properly in this paper include the effect of prolonged spectatorship and the pleasures involved in horror film spectatorship: if *Wolf Creek* shocked upon its first screening, it will not take long for the social and political relevancy of the film to dissipate and for Mick to become another legendary and safe pop cultural icon – particularly when the sequels are inevitably churned out - which will undoubtedly result in a new mutation of the larrikin figure.

To conclude, while *Wolf Creek* depicts horrific and brutal events, one would expect a horror film set in what is considered one of the safest destinations in the world unlikely to frighten potential visitors from visiting it. In the case of *Wolf Creek*, one could argue that there is almost some comfort to be found in the film. As John Jarratt puts it in an interview about the film, alluding to the inefficiency of the United States government to help in the immediate wake of Hurricane Katrina, “more horrific than this *Wolf Creek* is what I’ve been seeing in New Orleans lately, what they’ve been doing to people in broad daylight... and then, the world’s full of all this stuff...” If the world is full of this frightening (and un-nameable) “stuff,” then it seems that such a narrative might even provide mild relief through its featuring of a concrete and clear-cut psycho-murderer (rather than, just say, a network of terrorists, disease, etc). Ultimately, this is a dark fantasy, but it is one that seems to resist the even darker uncertainty provided by the global political landscape.

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