Land is(land): Australian film lore
Neill Overton
Loosely hinged doors flap in a blowfly haze; John Meillon slapping his wet dishtowel on the bar. A goods train unfurls like an endless necklace of rust, clanking out the minutes over the forever flat landscape. It is the opening scene of *Wake in Fright*; the indentured schoolteacher has done his best to scrub up besuited, hair slicked, suitcased, to make his holiday bid to escape Tiboonda, from salt-bush small town to… daydreaming of the sweat and sand of Bondi, and beers. It is a potent film image that dominates our conception of rural life, and evinces our eagerness to equate the small with the parochial. (figure 1) In art the parallel lies in the looming rib-cage trees Drysdale rudely parked in the uninhabited emptiness of small towns; all verandahs, brown sinews, and nothingness. (figure 2)

Three competing mythologies have dominated Australian film lore; early Australian films projected concepts of Empire, defining our landscape in relation to a distant Britain. The narratives depicted parallels to painting tropes of an arid, hostile landscape requiring European conquest. Silent films such as *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927) construct visual landscape metaphors of Australia as both desert, and as island. (figure 3) Land is ‘land’ perceived as ownerless; terra nullius. The Antipodes rapidly became visually coded through film as the remote desert island upon which Britain’s population detritus was marooned. Early major Australian films included *The Silence of Dean Maitland* in 1934, directed by Ken G. Hall, which offers a particular screen memory of an era of the British empire – against the historical memory of this period.

From silent rock-hewn prison, to *Walkabout* (1971) and *Wake in Fright* (1971) – the two key linchpin works of the Australian film renaissance of the 1970s, that visualised the interior of regional Australia as a place of unrelenting harshness and foreboding, into which white European settlers, and particularly children – simply disappear and become “lost”. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), directed by Peter Weir, epitomises Australian films echoing the visual codes of early Australian painting – established “the bush” as inhospitable predator, typified by Frederick McCubbin’s painting *Lost* (1886), and embodying that which in 1876, the writer Marcus Clarke referred to as the “weird melancholy” of the Australian landscape.
Since the 1970s, Australian films have been contesting these speculative fictions. Shifts in representations of the distant British empire in films that depict the past, became increasingly reflected in Australian cinema through concepts of “struggle” and the non-British story as history.

Professor Ann Curthoys is an Australian historian who has critically examined how objective history writing can purport to be, in particular towards representations of indigenous histories. In 2006, Curthoys scrutinized the divided “truths” of history writing through her propositions in *Is History Fiction?*, wherein she asks:

…is history fiction? Yet in asking if history is fiction, we are also seeking to explore (E.H.) Carr’s question, what is history? Like him, we ask about problems of historical truth, the relationship between the historian and the past, and questions of fact, value and interpretation.

There are reconstructions of differing periods of Australia’s history that have preoccupied our filmmaking, often as a reflection on the “immediate” past – usually about twenty years removed – and historical or period films paraded as a legitimizing “truth” of account, yet invariably they represent the time (and values) of the vantage point from which they were made… and how “Australian” or transatlantic our cultural identity was perceived as being.

Two Australian films shot fifty years apart featuring the same actor – Bill Kerr – are the platform of my discussion of shifting codes of representation of Australianness. *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934) by Ken G. Hall, and *The Settlement* (1983) directed by Howard Rubie, chart how we identify the Australian voice in film, and our shifting view of the British empire in films representing the past. Bill Kerr was a child star from Wagga Wagga in musical theatre, revues, eisteddfods, and had early major film roles in Australian films. In 1934, he featured as the young son in *The Silence of Dean Maitland* – with cinematography by the lauded documentary photographer, Frank Hurley. (figure 6)
The Silence of Dean Maitland came from the book written by Maxwell Gray in 1886 in England, so it was already steeped in the mores of a bygone society that was being represented – from forty years previous. It was first made into a now-lost film in Australia in 1914 by Raymond Longford. The plot was of a young clergyman who seduces, or is seduced by, a young woman in the village who becomes pregnant. When her father finds them together, there is a struggle and Dean Maitland accidentally kills him. Circumstances arise whereby Maitland’s best friend is accused of the murder, and Maitland allows him to be wrongly convicted for the crime and imprisoned for twenty years… Through his “silence”.

Ken G. Hall described The Silence of Dean Maitland as “the film that saved Cinesound”. iii It was financially and critically a hugely successful film in Britain. It starred two imported British actors; John Longden had early success in England, notably in the first talking film released there in 1929 – Alfred Hitchcock’s Blackmail, in which he had a leading role. He and his wife, Charlotte Francis, were touring the provinces in theatre productions for J. C. Williamson’s in 1933 when Hall starred them in this film. According to Hall: “It was sold in England for a very big figure, far higher than any previous Australian film. Without ever saying the locale was England, I was able to suggest it very strongly by shooting the exteriors round a town which began as an early settlement: Camden, the birthplace of the wool industry, thirty miles south-west of Sydney. A long shot of the town, with its beautifully spired church on a hilltop, appears in the film as Belminster, which is a name English enough for anybody.” iv

And further Hall noted that: “John Longden, an experienced film actor dating from the late silent days, was tall, good-looking, with a good voice and, as you’d expect, excellent diction.” v This in the era where being elocuted to death was the barometer of breeding; and “excellent diction” meant drawing-room Britain. The generically veiled location of a church spire somewhere in a rustic corner of any imagined British village ensured its transatlantic success. (figure 7)
At Dean Maitland’s death, his blind son sings “abide with me”, as the windows open up towards a lofty cloudscape. It is British drawing-room melodrama. Noted film historian Graham Shirley, in Australian Cinema - The First Eighty Years, wrote: “After the wholehearted Australiana of the first two Cinesound films met with poor critical response in England, Hall had decided to feature a “reasonably glossy” look that incorporated settings and characters acceptable as either English or Australian.”

In his casting notes towards this film, Hall writes: “good diction, no accent”. It is a film that readily disguises its Antipodean origins; aspiring to pass for British. It is only the immaturity of youth that is broadly strine of voice; as if the Australian vernacular is something one grows out of. It made far more money in Britain than in Australia – 40,000 pounds, a vast sum at the time – where it was released with no hint that it was Australian.

Previously, Ken G. Hall’s establishing films, such as On Our Selection (1932) traded on rampant Australiana. Yet the limitations of the Australian market caused him and other Australian filmmakers to seek transatlantic acceptance; the kleiglights of Hollywood loomed large in its melodramas. Hollywood and London offered us unfair terms of exchange, routinely requiring an imported lead actor or director to compensate for our presumed parochial taint.

In Silence of Dean Maitland, we strongly identify the Britishness of adult characters. The young boy played by Bill Kerr is allowed to be Australian of voice, like the working class men walking in to put ice in the ice-box. The “adult” voice is markedly British, it is educated, it is not the vulgar broad Australian tone crashing upon the ears. (figure 8) The object lesson is that when men grow up, they leave behind childish things such as Australian voice… a grown up is British, is white, is the cultured ABC voice aloft out of a bakelite radio. Coral Browne’s voice was suitably transatlantic, as was Peter Finch’s… shifting on occasion as he did from a very BBCed pukka ABC radio voice in the late 1930s, to the strine of The Shiralee (1957). In Peter Finch’s first film, Mr Chedworth Steps Out, directed by Ken G. Hall in 1940 – even as a callow youth – Finch and his father (Cecil Kellaway) are British-voiced,
while working class people and boys are depicted as relentlessly unruly vulgarians yet to, or never to, “grow up”.

By way of contrast, the film *The Settlement* which was made in 1983 – is set in rural Australia in the 1950s, and relies rather more on “good accent, no diction”. The film begins with two drifters, Kearney and Martin, who have been on the tramp… wandering into the small town of Cedar Creek, working a con-game in the pub to swindle a few pounds. They move into an abandoned shack on the outskirts of town, and are soon joined by Joycie – the town barmaid with a past as a prostitute, and their unorthodox relationship unfolds. (figures 9, 10)

The “struggle” represented is not only against the unyielding Drysdale landscape, all skeleton rocks and parched bones of Cedar Creek, but against the still clammy hand of rural Catholic morality of the 1950s. The menage-a-trois taking place in the shack on the edge of town becomes the magnet for narrow minded prejudice. The white-gloved Catholic women of rural township as CWA mafia on the prowl. (figure 11)

John Jarratt, who may well end up best remembered for his Hannibal Lecter turn in *Wolf Creek* (2005), displays in *The Settlement* just how fine an intuitive, underplaying actor he always was. Lorna Lesley was nominated for an AFI award in 1983 for best actress for her role. One scene involves Kearney and Martin raising funds in a boxing tent-show, and like the end of days of the film *The Wild Bunch* (1969), this is part of the last smoke-trail of a disappearing culture. (figure 12)

It had taken an outsider, in Canadian director Ted Kotcheff, to take a cinematic scalpel to the Australian psyche in his film *Wake in Fright* (1971), and it coloured all the films that followed such as *The Settlement*... More directly than most, as Howard Rubie had been the first assistant director and Second Unit Director on *Wake in Fright*, which was shot in Broken Hill. So as a director, Rubie’s visual codes of seared landscape do stem from *Wake in Fright’s* palette.
ECO-HORROR

The term “eco-horror” gained credential in film criticism by 2010, disseminated through Catherine Simpson’s essay on Australian eco-horror in *Studies in Australasian Cinema*; it was Simpson’s stated eco-postcolonial position to define genres of Australian film where nature itself was responding to our trespass and intrusion. The landscape recoiled with killer crocodiles in films such as *Dark Age* (1987), relentless rain and hailstones in Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* (1977) or in particular in *Razorback* (1984) with a giant feral *Razorback* pig. It goes without saying that the lead role in *Razorback* of the wild-boar hunter, Jake Cullen, was played by Bill Kerr... my theory being that everything in the known world is only one degree of separation from Wagga Wagga. (figure 13) In *Razorback* the killer boar is a largely unseen terror of shuddering tin sheds, wreathed in blue smokey haze, or the kinetic clang of windmills in a blur of farmyard mud. 900 pounds of tusks and trotters. But the true eco-horror of *Razorback* may well lie in the Broken Hill landscape itself where it was shot. In effect; it is the landscape as protagonist. (figure 14)

Catherine Simpson sees the film *Razorback* in terms of the relationships which evolved between co-existing animals and inhabitants, rather than the landscape itself. She writes:

*Razorback*’s pigs have morphed into monsters that exist in a sinister symbiotic relationship with the workers at the Pet-pak factory whose livelihood depends on the slaughter of kangaroos (O’Regan 1996).viii

The *Razorback* pig becomes at once outback yeti, abominable and mythological, disappeared the way of the Tasmanian tiger... or rather of conjured creatures. Its threat is that of Jurassic Park, a shudder of louvre blinds in the seeping orange night, or the heft and rattling of corrugated tin as its dumb weight charges towards an open shed under slashing overhead fan blades... It even features a highly surreal kangaroo hunt at night, part grand guignol and part kinetic homage to *Wake in
Fright’s seminal, real horror of spotlight kangaroo hunting at night. There is a fluid conjoining of landscape as primal monster, and mythological Australian beast at work in Razorback. (figure 15) It is an underrated film, for which Dean Semler justly won the AFI award for best cinematography in 1984, prior to his going on to win the Academy Award for cinematography for Dances with Wolves (1990) directed by Kevin Costner. Suffice it to say, he is the quintessential cinematographer of eulogies to landscapes fading into history’s forgotten wells.

According to Simpson:

Using what I call an eco-postcolonial framework, I argue that, first, in their attitudes to foreigners, tourists and/or trespassers as ‘prey’, these films extend postcolonial anxieties over settler Australian notions of belonging. In the second section, drawing on the work of Val Plumwood, I argue that the existence of large predators like the crocodile challenges the notion of human mastery over nature.ix

This uncomfortably conflates two separate types of engagement with the tropes of “the inhospitable landscape” theatre of Australian art – the landscape as sentient entity rejecting the European voice and footnote pervades Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975), and the Aboriginal as black-boogieman shadow of The Last Wave (1977), an overrated early work by Peter Weir that mythologises the urban Aborigine as voodoo-mystic. Terra-terror is invested here in the creeping horror of rain and flood, but the film is so immersed in tone that its narrative grinds haltingly, and then inconclusively peters out by film’s end.

The landscape as narrative spur does not always fit the convenient definitions of “eco-horror” from Simpson, which tend to fall over when ascribed too liberally to other genres of Australian film, including Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975). The landscape itself at Hanging Rock is not an “eco-horror”, it merely resists our colonial view of the Australian landscape as a place to be fenced off, subjugated, or
The film is held suspended in its mythical leanings by the cinematography of Russell Boyd, whose palette consciously recomposed Australian Impressionism’s Mentone painting strokes of saturated heat haze, and dream-states. *Picnic at Hanging Rock* never animates itself in any horrific means; rather it is we, the white settlers who are completely misplaced, as the film sinks further into a buttery somnambulism.

Given the largesse with which the term “eco-horror” has been so widely applied by film critics, I prefer the term I myself coined of “terra-terror”… Wherein the earth itself rails against human intervention. The harshness of the landscape rebounds, and its marked resistance to European settlement and roping off, is in marked distinction to genres of mutated beasts or conjured science fiction scenarios. “Terra-terror” applies to *Burke and Wills* (1985), and any film whereby European ignorance and underestimation of the land prompts their own destruction.

“Terra nullius” is the Latin term for land owned by no one, which may be “claimed through occupation”. It rests on the premise that the occupier is absent. In film critique, in proposing the term “terra-terror” – which is fear of the landscape itself, and the reprisals it enacts – this echoes the peculiarly Australian condition of European invasion from the British based on their prevailing doctrine of “terra nullius”. The ecology is not predator in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975)… rather it is we who are displaced in this environment, just as in the film of *Burke and Wills* (1985) or *Walkabout* (1971) for that matter, beginning as it does with John Meillon’s odd, nervous breakdown demise and a VW in flames leaving the schoolgirl and her brother walking off balefully into the interior. We represent white colonists who have ventured too far. To the point where arid red desert folds back like a crumpled bed-sheet to reclaim itself. It is a desert teeming with animal life, writhing under a celestial microscope; at once intensely visual and hallucinatory. (figure 16)
Both films, *The Silence of Dean Maitland* and *The Settlement*, albeit fifty years between, position organised religion as the dark enemy on the hill – whether Anglican or Catholic – both denoted by their unadorned hypocrisy, which in turn leads to downfall. Ken G. Hall’s 1930s film was a document of religion’s gradual disappearance from social dominance, that by the 1950s of *The Settlement*’s time period is reduced to a shopfront of cucumber sandwiches, frocks and white-gloved suppression.

Religion and white settler moralism is the pervading undercurrent which governs the film *Jedda*, directed in 1955 by Charles Chauvel. The importance of *Jedda* as a first in Australian film is its casting of not one, but two Aboriginal leads, who carry the narrative of the film. Ngarla and Tudawali, and its central theme is of miscegenation; of a young Aboriginal baby girl Jedda, adopted by the white wife of the station owner, and by the time she is 16 years old is increasingly stranded between two different cultures. (figure 17) The film’s perspective of land is a patrician one, of needing to protect the young girl Jedda from “going native” and being lured away by Tudawali’s seductive tribal song-cry echoing plaintively across the empty night. Tudawali as Marbuk is depicted in fearful tones as a purveyor of dark magic, all antipodean voodoo doll rituals on screen. In stark opposition is the role of the half-caste foreman Joe, who is portrayed as attempting to civilise and better himself in shirts and trousers, and with a thoroughly Eton accent, as opposed to Tudawali who refuses to wear white clothing, and proudly displays the marking of tribal scarification, and is lurking at vision’s edge as a mesmerising, stone-age savage.

In England, the film was released under the title of *Jedda – the Uncivilized*, with the poster campaign of: “The magic of the native mating call was stronger than the habits of civilization.” (figure 18) This zombie-brush has been lushly applied to the Aborigine in Australian film lore. It is part of what the Bundjalung curator and art historian Djon Mundine referred to in 2014 as Australian films that are Aboriginal gothic; with indigenous characters lurking there as the dangerous creature from the Freudian Id; the shadow-other."
Yet importantly the film *Jedda* does convey the different perspective to landscape that the Aboriginal view encompasses. The land is seen through assertions of its spiritual significance. It mounts our first filmic speculative narratives about Aboriginal anchorage to place; which more recent films including *The Tracker* (2002), *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), *Ten Canoes* (2006), *Samson and Delilah* (2009), *Charlie’s Country* (2013) and *Mystery Road* (2013) have built upon. The land itself in the film *Jedda*, is characterised as if it is a sentient siren call to primitivism, and more so to “those people”. The Aborigines on the property play in the dirt and ready themselves to go walkabout, and “civilisation” begins and ends at the flywire screen door on the wide board verandah.

If the attitudes of the stockman’s wife, Sarah McMann, in *Jedda* are a view of the inability of the wild Aborigine to assimilate, then these views find equal voice in Elsa Chauvel’s own account of the film’s making. Elsa Chauvel was Charles Chauvel’s wife and collaborator in production of his films. The 16 year old “Ngarla”, (Rosalie Kunoth, who played *Jedda*), lived with the Chauvels during the making of *Jedda* for six months, of which time Elsa Chauvel writes in her biography:

On Sundays Ngarla would wear her pretty blue dress and go to church with us. She looked so attractive with not a button or a bow out of place. She would arrive back home and within five minutes would be tumbling and rolling all over the lawn like a wild puppy, until her dress was a rag and her brown legs a mass of scratches from the shrubs and rose bushes.\(^{\text{xI}}\)

This statement from Elsa Chauvel could slip seamlessly into the film’s scripting of the character of the station-owner’s wife, and undoubtedly did mirror that character’s role, in the equating of pristine cleanliness as a white virtue, racially undermined by the seemingly ingrained Aboriginal disposition - in this case romping like a “wild puppy”. Or as author Jane Mills specified in her book on *Jedda* in 2012, Sarah McMann institutes her separatist protections across Jedda’s life, to pry her away from the “uncivilised” trappings of her Aboriginal tribe:
Here, as throughout the film, cleanliness and propriety stand for whiteness, while dirt and disruption stand for Aboriginality.\textsuperscript{xii}

Mythologies of transgression and of “otherness” depicted in relationship to the (absent) parent country began to embrace regionalism. The film \textit{Jedda} (1955), from director Charles Chauvel, identifies differing indigenous/white European concepts of landscape as protagonist – and of our sense of ownership or occupation of land. Current filmmakers are actively interrogating our colonial past – excavating Australian film lore’s perpetuating visual notions of Australian landscape as unused, dormant; awaiting European intervention. Themes of miscegenation were prevalent in Hollywood by 1946 – notably in \textit{Duel in the Sun} with Jennifer Jones as a “half-caste” Native American girl, and Chauvel had visited Hollywood with every intention of making an epic “kangaroo Western” back in Australia that might bestride Katherine Gorge in the way that John Ford was casting his sweeping, horizontal lens across an unrelenting rocky Utah and Monument Valley.

\textbf{ALTERITY}

David Stratton reflected on the wave of Australian cinema between 1980 to 1990 (some 270 feature films) in his book \textit{The Avocado Plantation}, to provide a strategic insight into what genres were funded and why in this period. Of which he wrote:

During the 80s, it became fashionable in some quarters to denigrate the historical Australian film. Some commentators referred, derisively, to the ‘AFC films’ – whatever that meant – to attack films dealing with the country’s past. Some filmmakers, funding bodies, even critics were intimidated by this misplaced aversion to the historical subject, and yet some of the best, and most successful, films of the decade were stories based on historical events.\textsuperscript{xiii}

He then cites \textit{Gallipoli} (1981), “which remains, for many, \textit{the} Australian film. It was a subject Peter Weir had been trying to make for several years.”\textsuperscript{xxiv} This film legitimized historical “narratives” about the past as a viable Australian lore.
This is why the discourse put forward by Ann Curthoys is so vital to the current 2015-2016 reassessment of the ways in which we view history as enacted speculation, and additionally why Catherine Simpson’s positions regarding horror/genres and how we attach these modern myths to Australian films, particularly those in Australia since 1970 – is wrenched wide open in this current dissection. We remain seduced by the grand mythologizings of the infinite pioneering Western movie, which turned since the 1940s for fresh blood to the unknown deserts of inland Australia as untapped, dark story mines.

Notably, regarding reviews in Britain of *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975):

David Robinson in *The Times*, 21st May 1975, found the qualities of John Ford in the film’s perception of ‘a sort of grandeur in people of the most limited horizons and spirits’. The film was also compared by film reviewer Ken Wlaschin in *Films and Filming*, August 1975, who likened the view of male companionship to the work of Howard Hawks.\(^\text{xv}\)

This comparison to the two key American directors of Westerns underscores the pictorial use of severe, endlessly horizontal, clay dust saddle-tramp vistas as a template for Antipodean western lore.

In considering film as if it is some type of iron-clad vessel of supposed truth about history – it is worth invoking Jean Baudrillard’s views regarding the photograph, as the ghost-trace left behind; the disappearance of everything else but the photograph itself as memory-resonator. It is the bullet casing discovered at the crime scene. In short:

Every photographed object is simply the trace left behind by the disappearance of everything else. It’s almost a perfect crime, an almost total final solution, as it were, for a world which projects only the illusion of this or that object, which the photograph...
then transforms – absent from the rest of the world, withdrawn from the rest of the world – into an unseizable enigma.\textsuperscript{xvi}

This Baudrillardian concept transfers itself to the forensic evidence shards left behind by “the film” as a document of a privileged, or rather “separated out” trail of truthful account. For every filmed object – the historic reality is identified only through its simulated reenactment on screen; as the object carrier of this virus of knowledge.

**WAKE IN FRIGHT**

*Wake in Fright* is permeated by shifts in the heat betokening the lead character John Grant’s emotional decline; locked into immobility within the land as prison; as isolated island exactly as it had been for Marcus Clarke’s *For the Term of His Natural Life*. (figure 19) The type of mateship on trial in *Wake in Fright* (1971) to the stranded schoolteacher is one of sun-bleached Broken Hill recast as “the Yabba”, where the constant question to any outsider is:

“New to the Yabba?”, he asked, inevitably, holding a great stem of yellow flame to Grant’s cigarette…\textsuperscript{xvii}

It is not *Gallipoli*’s mateship forged in adversity, but of fierce, white inland xenophobia and of perceived intruders. Welcome and inclusion comes at grave cost, in a town either beyond law, or ruled by its own straitjacketed codes. David Stratton also noted, in terms of mateship’s leathery underbelly, that: “The Mad Max films use the landscape of the Australian outback with extraordinary imagination.”\textsuperscript{xviii} And elaborated on that with: “And the links with Hollywood westerns (with the classic plot of Indians attacking the fort) are strong.”\textsuperscript{xix} In fact, Australian film history could not have gestated a more neo-Shane figure as lone western hero than Max Rockatansky; albeit set in a pocked, scorched dystopian future.

In terms of the constructed “otherness” of Australian cinema, Tom O'Regan identified that:
Every feature of Australian storytelling discussed so far ‘fits’ to some degree this othering of the Australian: its situation between the melodrama and the art film, its centring types and social observation, its freaks and monsters, and its subsidiary stream of excoriations of Australian lifeways. All these turn on establishing relations of alterity between the audience and what is on-screen.xxx

Not enough credit is accorded by film scholars to Chips Rafferty’s commitment to maintain filmmaking in this country in the 1950s. The cattle station or rugged, individualist bushman films he made included *The Phantom Stockman* (1953), and *The King of the Coral Sea* (1954) produced by Chips Rafferty’s own determinedly Australian based company, and directed by his collaborator Lee Robinson. They also co-produced *Walk into Paradise* (1956), committed to resuscitating the ailing Australian film industry. *Walk into Paradise* (1956) pits an ill-fitting band of travellers against unrelenting nature. It is fitting that Chips Rafferty’s last on screen film performance was to give us the seminal figure of the police sergeant in *Wake in Fright* (1971), marking as that film did the canonic rebirth of the Australian film renaissance. As the director Ted Kotcheff noted in 2009, “It was the last film of the great Australian cinema actor Chips Rafferty and the first film of the outstanding Jack Thompson.”xxxi A more symbolic handing over of the torch could not have been choreographed – given how astoundingly brilliant Chips Rafferty’s last, valedictory screen performance was. Some future film historian may well write similarly of Jack Thompson’s performance in *Mystery Road* (2013) as marking another generational changing of the guard.

**WESTERNS**

The Antipodes as a place of mystery, dread... imagination’s last repository of seared earth. In painting and then film, it was encoded in images as another type of darkest
Africa that could be sent back to Britain. Later, this otherness was in relation to America, who saw the exoticness of inner Australia as another frontier landscape of pioneers triumphing over the harshness of desert and hostile natives. Charles Chauvel was markedly in thrall to the American western film when he made Jedda in 1955. It is known as a first in Australian film history for two key reasons; it is lauded as the first colour film made in Australia. Yes and no; the film Kangaroo (1952) preceded it by several years, but was not an Australian production. It was made in Australia, featuring American leads in Peter Lawford and Maureen O'Hara, and was directed by the American director Lewis Milestone.

For Chauvel, the second distinctive factor of Jedda was in its boldness of casting Aboriginal leads – which was undoubtedly fuelled by Hollywood genre trends towards exploring the “half-caste” in Westerns, and his sense of courting transatlantic success by representing on screen the exotic, tribal wildness of the uniquely Australian aborigine. That said, the patrician landowner’s motives espoused in the film towards caring for the Aborigine are also editorial views of Charles Chauvel’s own genuine intent towards the Aboriginal people. It is a considerable advocacy for respect for Aboriginal cultural mores, as muddied as the film Jedda becomes by gothic demonising.

Regarding Ivan Sen’s more recent outback noir, Goldstone (2016), the critic of The Guardian newspaper Luke Buckmaster, writes:

Goldstone belongs to a suite of Australian films that contemplate land ownership in memorable ways, from 1932’s On Our Selection to 1950’s Bitter Springs and even 1997’s The Castle. But it has more weight than any of them, because the film’s spiritual roots hark back to the traditional owners of the land. In a small but moving role David Gulpilil plays a man who cannot be bought; his soul is connected to the ground and the sky.

Australian landscape is a place not only of competing mythologies, but conflicting histories. It has been constructed through speculative fictions that “model” its history.
for us in literature, painting, film, theatre, and in history writing itself. “The Antipodes” was framed as a place of nameless dread; the bleached bone terrors of an arid, inhospitable inland desert that would consume the jettisoned convict, or pioneering white settler in its unforgiving, orange dust maw.

Riding parallel to this shadowed psyche of “land” were the suppressed histories of indigenous relationship to country and place. Our colonial culture, tea-stained by anglophilia, pursued unsustainable farming and mining practices that led to degradation of the land itself. Hindsight, that rear-vision mirror we seldom bother to glance at, tells us that we have strip-mined the land through blind deference to the false gods of petrol and coal. Slag heaps, tailings and toxic waterways are left as if inevitable scars of “progress”; to the extent that Mad Max: Fury Road (2015) and Razorback’s Pet-pak factory are spreadeagled documentaries of degradation, cosy mangles of scrapyards left rusted out in the sun of an inevitable Australian near-future filmscape. (figure 20)

The deeply iconic film Sunday Too Far Away (1975) also stages itself in an historic period that has recently elapsed; the outset of the shearsers’ strike in the mid 1950s. Made to reflect upon an Australia only twenty years removed, the film trades and treads in the mire of nostalgia; the longing for a disappeared clarity left tantalisingly dry on the memory shelf; of still living recollections of an FJ Holden car rolling and tumbling wildly in the dirt – nary a seat-belt in sight. The “fin de siècle” is an oft revisited theme in Australian film, or rather in the sense of aspects of rural culture becoming rapidly lost; firmly underlined in The Settlement’s use of the boxing tent show travelling regional Australia as history metaphor of eclipsed societies. In Sunday Too Far Away, it is the ennobled worker on the land, and dogged realisms of drink and male mateship; its pictorial codes plainly shuffle the cards of Tom Roberts into view. It was said of Sunday Too Far Away that: “it is a romantic glorification of the Australian itinerant worker, the shearer, but it is a glorification of him as he really was.”xxiii This is a rather prescient description of the see-saw of historical truth and fiction in its film incarnation. Is this depiction of the shearer’s life a history, or is it as romanticised as various odes to bushrangers and convicts? (figures 21, 22)
Charles Chauvel’s motives were arguably less to do with evangelical zeal about Aboriginal regard for the meaning of land, than his own then recent trips to America. He saw in Jedda the opportunity to make a film of great appeal to the American market – a “kangaroo western”, which after the success of The Overlanders in 1946 with Chips Rafferty, had become the term given to this genre of cowboy western pasted upon the weird melancholy of the Australian bush as its exotic backdrop. For Ealing studios, the British producers who made The Overlanders here, the Australian desert was one which could readily be seen as a marginal outpost of Empire, with heroic white settlers struggling to assert essentially British values in spite of the relentless droughts, and skirmishes with hostile natives. In Jedda, Charles Chauvel could construct a western chase epic of the young kidnapped girl Jedda, being tracked by a white posse hunting the renegade native warrior Tudawali. (figure 23) The shadow of John Ford’s epic American westerns looms large over the style and structure Chauvel sought. Katherine Gorge was to Chauvel the landscape as intervening protagonist, in the exact and exacting way that John Ford has inscribed Monument Valley in Utah on western films as more than picturesque backdrop, but the vast instigator of events – from Stagecoach (1939) with John Wayne on into celluloid elegy. Like Ford, Chauvel was essentially a locationist director intent on landscape realisms and the scale of nature.

If Chauvel’s hand was firmly on the pulse of Hollywood success, the opposite of this was to be found in Ken G. Hall’s gaze towards London and British film. In the 1950s, Cinesound pictures and indeed all filmmaking in Australia cranked rapidly to a halt – barring Chips Rafferty’s three film productions. But Australian film post World War Two lacked sufficient government support, and local audience. In the mid 1950s, Ken G. Hall moved on to become the head of Channel 9, and to produce our early television shows here.

Film historian Andrew Pike refers to this ebb tide of the Australian film industry as a clear “boom and bust” cycle preceding the 1970s Australian film renaissance:
The past, in terms of Australian feature film production, is a distant one. After a short burst of activity between 1910 and 1912, the production of feature films declined sharply and continued at a level of rarely more than 10 features a year until World War II. Efforts to revive production after the disruptions caused by the war failed, and during the 1950s and 1960s only a few locally made features were completed. This period of inactivity ended abruptly, however, in 1970; new people had come to dominate production, beliefs in the nature of a viable industry had altered, and the films being made bore little resemblance to earlier work.xxiv

My essay deliberately draws upon the bibliographies of this post 1970s resuscitation, of Australian film histories of the 1970s to 1990s, to realign them with the more recent endeavours by film scholars to find differing conceptions of Australian film genres in this period of scrutiny of landscape as eco-horror since 2010. It is mistaken to view eco-horror as other than a fashionable international cycle towards zombies, the undead, mutations and morphing, werewolves and cyborgs, in varying incarnations. In Australian terms, terra-terror is far more appropriate in identifying a localised Australian film genre. We have no monsters, other than here.

From Tracey Moffatt’s more arthouse films, to the current expansions of indigenous film which changed markedly with Ten Canoes (2006) by Rolf de Heer, first placing indigenous language on film, and to contemporary Aboriginal filmmakers such as Warwick Thornton directing Samson and Delilah (2009), and his focus on present day survival issues for youth in remote Aboriginal communities… there is a shift in the gaze of this land, and of being in country. Current indigenous directors such as Warwick Thornton and Ivan Sen are markedly challenging the colonial white filmmaking paradigms and its “ownership” of white history. Warwick Thornton views film as still a relatively emergent media, and one best suited culturally to be made in and of the landscape, and as such to recalibrate indigenous oral histories. According to Thornton:

Cinema is a very new thing. We can use it to create a new ‘Dreaming’, and turn our oral history into celluloid to keep our culture alive. Culture needs to move, it can’t be
chiseled into rock. I made *Samson and Delilah* to show how resilient and strong Aboriginal children are.\textsuperscript{xxv}

The landscape iconography perhaps registers strongest in a film such as *Mystery Road* (2013), where director Ivan Sen addresses an indigenous police officer estranged from his own community. Aridity, and the status of the “half-caste”, continues in the wake of *Jedda* to perpetuate themes of displacement — or in this case an Aboriginal man straddling two cultures — his heritage with his own people, and that of being in the police force, subject to that culture of European law and privilege. This displaced Aboriginal detective is played by Aaron Pedersen. It continues to retrace the *Jedda* sense of miscegenation, and of an Aboriginal character held transfixed between two cultures. *Mystery Road* (2013) continues the Chauvel engagement with the “kangaroo Western” although Ivan Sen is a deft, genre crossing filmmaker sliding albeit effortlessly into outback crime noir, taken further in his sequel of *Goldstone* (2016). (figure 24)

In terms of speculative fictions, wherein a film casts itself as being an historic narrative, depictive truth of an earlier time-period, or retelling of a known narrative — the film by Rolf de Heer of *The Tracker* (2002) achieves a multi-layered perspective that is at once “white settler”, but subverted throughout by the stronger iterations of competing indigenous truths regarding memory, fact, and the positing of lived memory, in its use of the living land as more than backdrop but catalyst in actions transpiring there. And not inconsequentially, its lead actor David Gulpilil, who since his first screen role in *Walkabout* (1971) is now more than a “film actor” in terms of the indigenous authority of his presence both on and off the screen.

In reflecting on the legitimacy and intention of history as “faction”, (itself a rather terrible term alluding to fiction generated to fill gaps in otherwise real, factual, historical accounts) in 2011, Ann Curthoys summarised the essential enquiry, as “history dead and live”, in short:

A perennially troubling issue for historians is, ‘how can we understand the
Past from the vantage point of the present? How do we both acknowledge our present day standpoint and at the same time fully recognise the alterity of the past, its profound otherness?³⁶

Ultimately, she links this to Benedetto Croce’s proposition that:

Accounts of the past that do not relate to an interest in the present are, in Croce’s view, mere chronicle. This idea, that we write history out of the urgent concerns of the present, has been taken up by a variety of subsequent thinkers about the nature of history, notably Collingwood and Foucault.³⁷

Do we only ever write history out of its symbiotic, urgent mirroring of concerns of the present? Is Peter Weir’s Gallipoli (1981) only written (by David Williamson) in the solid shadow of the Vietnam war? Is the motive in the surge of late 1970s period piece Australian films to find some firmer, legitimised, in fact Europeanised cinematic pacing more in line with then-prevailing European arthouse films? Undoubtedly, it was the local film industry’s need to find “serious” or literary adaptations, such as My Brilliant Career (1979), or We of the Never Never (1982) – to balance out the perception of Australian film as only being of the knockabout early populist The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972) and Alvin Purple (1973) kind. The film that best straddled the literary and broad ocker comedy genres was the wildly inventive Stork (1971), written as it was by David Williamson, with his acute vernacular ear for language and real situations.

Greg Clarke writes somewhat in rebuttal of Curthoys that:

Historians also realised that the majority had adopted a specific form—that of the historical novel. Could historians use other forms while still writing history rather than fiction (e.g. first-person narration, multiple viewpoints, commentary on photos)?³⁸
The implications of this transplanted to critique of film culture has been to the speculative fictions assembled on screen purporting to detail real historical events, such as the Ealing imported directors working on *Eureka Stockade* (1949), with Chips Rafferty. This is history writ large, or Brit large, dragged with a rather wildly miscast finger through the facts. Clarke raises a telling concern regarding why history writers bridge fiction in the manner they choose to do – the historical fiction novel can avoid fictionalising “the gaps” in account and take on the need for investing authority in one, singular “authorial voice”, or as Clarke states:

Historians who write are implicated in the histories they write. In other words, one author’s history is not the same as another’s. However, this authorial involvement need not be determinative, nor does it stop their account from being historical.

**ECO-HORROR II**

Eco-horror films in Australia, black hand in white glove, exist uneasily with the demonised celluloid Antipodean voodoo of the evil or untamed “other” represented by Aboriginal presence. It is also the Antipodes as the last great untamed western frontier. The term Aboriginal gothic is referred to by Djon Mundine, in accounting for depictions of the film variants of Aboriginal presence as “suppressed primal fears that surface in celluloid dreams. From Fred Schepisi’s *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) to Tracey Moffatt's *Bedevil* (1993).” It began with the character of Marbuck as played by Tudawali in *Jedda*, and found further form as some kind of Aboriginal witchdoctor-bone-pointing in Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* (1977). Aboriginality is in Australian film lore since the 1970s always lurking at the edges of screen, as the dangerous, partly seen creature from the Freudian Id. Primitive, primal, unsanctioned by the governance of society. Djon Mundine notably related this to the Ray Bradbury book, *The Martian Chronicles*, wherein the colonisers had
removed all trace of the inhabitants, yet they still remained there as a shadow presence. xxxii

*The Last Wave* (1977) tends to be retrospectively revered because it is a Peter Weir film; from this director whose filmmaking skills parlayed into international success through the contemplative *Witness* (1985) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989). But *The Last Wave*’s reputation rests on its thematic inclusion of Aboriginality in urban Australia. As daring as the film is, it is not successful as cultural tract, in that its depictions of urban Aboriginality careen into the voodoo-mystic realm way too wholeheartedly. Sudden hailstorms in the desert, and downpourings of black rain herald some magic supernatural event; intimated but never realised. It is a tacit blaxploitation film. Weir’s films of this period all seem to be diversely seeking a philosophical undercurrent of mysticism and strange magic in and through nature and the land. (figure 25)

Film theorist Andrew Pike summarised Weir’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*’s presence as invoking: “The awe-inspiring power of the Australian bush, which alienates some and hypnotically absorbs others.” xxxiii It is a cinematography of hypnosis, of a vaselined lens and smoke-stained disappearance as the white petals of girls slip forever into gaps in the rocks. It is the low keyed palette of the Australian Impressionist paintings remade into moving picture; as if a Frederick McCubbin camera panning through muslin.

Peter Weir’s first feature film *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) was actually a schlock drive-in theatre picture, marinated in its own bush township horror genre – certainly not terra-terror, but more crazy townsfolk mass killers… *Deliverance* (1972) without the banjos. Weir only fully realized his epic vision as a history/speculative fiction filmmaker in *Gallipoli* (1981), where every aspect of this film coheres in the assured stature of script-as-history-truth, narrative resolve, acting and an emotional power of place.
In Ross Gibson’s chapter Formative Landscapes, in Scott Murray’s anthology *Australian Cinema*, he examined the role of “the landscape” as societal map in depicting our competed Australian histories in film. Film representation has been motivated by the concept of an identifiable nationalism. There is something quite flawed and phoney in Australian films using “landscape” as the rally cry of an homogenous national myth. As Gibson states:

The landscape-cinema has asserted Australia’s difference from the rest of the world, and it has also asserted the nation’s singularity of constitution within its own boundaries. That is to say, there has been an attempt to portray ‘us’ as one people growing to maturity and confidence ‘together’. Films such as *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Man from Snowy River* (1982), and *We of the Never Never* (1982), have said, ‘Here is the key to our identity… Here are the myths that we need.’ They have been presented as ‘generically Australian.’

**CONCLUSION**

The genre term “eco-horror” arose by 2007 in relation to semi-documentary films of ecological horror, but Simpson confirmed it further in application to fictional horror films, or ecology overturning. This was the “nature gone wild” genre of mutated rats, rogue crocodiles, killer sharks of *Jaws*, or piranha – either real or mutated. The natural horror of the rugged Australian inland has generated a ready post 1970s identification with the horror genre of filmmaking; much in the manner that the remoteness of Antarctica gives rise to films like *The Thing* (1982) of mutated invasions locked down in a distant base in the snow. Australia is a naturally arid Petri dish for this type of film of lost world isolation, or of landscapes presumed to be removed from modernity. The problem or rather inaccuracy with this which I identified earlier is that it bundles together very dissimilar films indiscriminately.

In arriving at a philosophy of Natural Horror as a contemporary worldwide film genre, Ben Woodward writes:
Natural horror has become an unremarkable part of the larger horror canon - giant animals terrorizing humankind has been part of horror film for almost a hundred years. The films generally fall into Hadot’s Orphic/Promethean split: either nature or one element of nature is ‘unbalanced’ by humanity or it centres on scientists playing god with nature.xxxvi

Contained in this is the forefront question of horror film narrative as either intervention in the land, through the intrusions of science or strip-mining, fracking and slagheaps… or the primal, untouched, terra nullius concept of the seemingly unbuilt environment of pristine landscape rising up with volcanic revenge against being despoiled.

In both cases humans are set apart and we reap the disruption of our existence in, yet separate from, nature due to our lack of understanding or our over-understanding of it.xxxvii

Ann Curthoys had this later reflection on her earlier work (of 2006) to offer in 2011, namely:

In a book I wrote with John Docker, called Is History Fiction?, we argued that history is both like and unlike fiction, in that it has a double character. History is on the one hand a rigorous search for truth about the past based on a study of the traces that the past leaves behind, in documents, memories, visual images, landscapes. On the other, it is a form of narrative that shapes accounts of the past in particular, culture-specific ways, the narrative form being not embroidery or decoration but an integral part of the search for truth about how and why things happened the way they did.xxxviii

But our selections as to which histories/fictions we will write is inevitably always through the lens of what we are compelled to evidence about the present. Our hindsight is a mirror with a written warning that things in it may seem closer than they are. Film as the only speculative fiction that will survive in our virtual libraries weighs
in heavily through its evident, depictive verisimilitudes: as Jean Baudrillard would have us see, as the remaining barometer of history-truth. The film *Gladiator* (2000) may yet prove to be the only “library tract” or “visual text” left in our collective inheritance as a history of the Roman empire. Moving image and 360 degree rapid editing trumps vellum bound written tome every time in this false contest between history and fiction. Australian film history has little manifest truth housed in its back catalogue; it offers us instead since 1906 varied, skewed parades of discordant interaction with this land and its inhabitants, largely lit up by fear and xenophobia – the image of the endlessly tall, rangy Chips Rafferty as the lean drover… may well be all that winds up jutting out of that 39th century future beach next to the half-buried Statue of Liberty. (figure 26)
FIGURES

Figure 1: Unrelenting shimmering heat of *Wake in Fright* (1971) d: Ted Kotcheff
Figure 2: Russell Drysdale *The Rabbiters* 1947 oil on canvas 77 x 102cms
Figure 3: Land (is)land. *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927) d: Norman Dawn
**Figure 4:** *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) d: Peter Weir
Figure 5: Frederick McCubbin Lost 1886 oil on canvas 116 x 74 cms
Figure 6: Bill Kerr (as the blind boy) in *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934) d: Ken G. Hall. Cinematography by Frank Hurley.
Figure 7: John Longden in *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934)
Figure 8: John Longden and Billy Kerr in Ken G. Hall’s *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1934)
Figure 9: Bill Kerr and John Jarratt in *The Settlement* (1983) d: Howard Rubie
Figure 10: Bill Kerr and Lorna Lesley in the shack at the edge of town in *The Settlement* (1983) d: Howard Rubie
Figure 11: Russell Drysdale *Shopping day* 1953 oil on canvas 59 x 75cms
Figure 12: Bill Kerr and John Jarratt in *The Settlement* (1983)... the end of days of the travelling boxing tent shows.
Figure 13: Bill Kerr as hunter Jake Cullen in *Razorback* (1984) d: Russell Mulcahy
Figure 14: Bill Kerr as an obsessive wild boar hunter in the AFI Award winning horror film *Razorback* (1984).
**Figure 15:** Terra-terror of the landscape itself at Broken Hill. *Razorback* (1984).

d: Russell Mulcahy, cinematography Dean Semler.
Figure 16: *Walkabout* (1971) d: Nicholas Roeg. Starring David Gulpilil, Jenny Agutter and Lucien John.
Figure 17: *Jedda* (1955) d: Charles Chauvel. Starring ‘Ngarla’ Kunoth, and Tudawali.
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d: Ted Kotcheff, starring Gary Bond and Chips Rafferty.
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Figure 24: The lone anti-hero of outback Australian ‘kangaroo noir’ in Mystery Road (2013).

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Figure 25: David Gulpilil in Peter Weir’s ‘Aboriginal gothic’ *The Last Wave* (1977).
Figure 26: Chips Rafferty stretched out across the vista of the elongated Antipodean Western of The Overlanders (1946) d: Harry Watt.

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