'STRAYA MATE: PROBING AN AUSTRALIAN MASCULINITY THROUGH LANDSCAPE NARRATIVE, VISUAL ART AND DYSTOPIAN CINEMA

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This paper explores the prevalence of landscape narratives in art and cinema containing post-apocalyptic futures, bushranger mythology and vigilantism, with a focus on the type of masculinity reflected within these contexts. I will introduce the kind of masculinity that is attributed to Australian men as part of a national myth of character, and will examine various dystopic film narratives, such as *Mad Max 2* (1981) and its recent counterpart *The Rover* (2014). In other words, I am drawn to narratives that feature a decline of civilisation, are set in an expansive Australian landscape, and often contain troubled male protagonists. I wish to demonstrate that this landscape, and its history of violence, hostility and suffering, feeds into post-colonial representations of reworked historical narratives and characters. Here, I link the American frontier to Australian representations of the fringe of white settlement via film theorist David Melbye's theory on landscape allegory. I also present creative works of my own that were produced in relation to these ideas, and use them to explore male characters not only as a facet of Australian cultural identity, but also in relation to wider concerns of masculinity and nature. I conclude with a discussion about Australian artists of my generation who are also tackling the issue of 'Aussie' masculinity.

AUSSIE BLOKES

Masculinity in 'White Australia' has been shaped by the pioneering spirit of the colony, and its dominant formation remains a complex construction of Anglo-Saxon settler experience. It can be read as a vestige, if you will, of the hardships of the colony, such as the brutality of conditions faced by convicts, the competition of the Gold Rush and land prospecting, and the physical struggle of convicts and free settlers alike with the harsh Australian environment. It is also a continuation of the 'mateship' established by the first and second world wars, the ANZAC tradition and/or myth. Growing up in rural Australia, I have experienced and been expected to adhere to a form of masculinity that is rough, fiercely loyal to 'mates' and seemingly sceptical of both authority and an equality of gender and non-hetero sexuality. Media scholar Callum Scott, in a catalogue essay for a photographic series by artist Brendan Lee entitled *Australia Days*, describes Australian national identity as 'built upon hard masculine foundations, using the harsh nature of the bush to exemplify these character traits'.[1] This claim will be revisited in this chapter, as it relates to how the physical environment has shaped masculinity, and is particularly evident in Australian cinema. Australian masculinity today still contains undercurrents of a hyper-macho heterosexual form of behaviour that is a blend of 'mateship' and rituals circulating around alcohol consumption, gambling and physical force.[2]

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1   Callum Scott, "Bogue Nation: Walking with Bogans", catalogue essay, (May 2011) accessed April 23, 2013, http://www.brendanlee.com/site.php?n=Main.BogueNationWalkingWithBogans

2   Russel Ward in *The Australian Legend* (1958) comments on the power of the construction of Australian 'mateship' and its associated rituals with alcohol. As he explains: 'By the 1800s mateship had become a powerful institution that often one could refuse an invitation to drink only at one's peril.' The film *Wake in Fright* (1971), mentioned later in this chapter, articulates this strange mentality on several occasions – and it's a mentality I have definitely experienced with 'mates'. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) 181.

Various terms have become part of a vernacular used to describe Australian myths of masculinity. One such term is that of the 'larrikin', a male-centric term that stemmed from the city-born working class.[3] The term larrikin has been reiterated recently by academic Hannah Piterman:

> The iconography of the larrikin is an inextricable part of the Australian tradition of masculinity. It connotes a rare combination of egalitarianism, irreverence, resilience and loyalty. This vision harks back to the Aussie spirit of the 'the diggers' – Australia's heroes, legends and mates. These men built the nation and fought on the battlefields in far-away lands to protect the Australian way of life and the 'fair go'.[4]

This explanation also encapsulates the complexities of (male) national identity in Australia; for example, the term 'digger' is a reference both to gold rush–era men seeking out their fortunes on the goldfields and, later, to the nation's soldiers digging trenches on the battlefield in the First World War. That war became a defining moment in Australia's national character, and is valorised today by remembering the Gallipoli conflict and the associated 'sacrifice' of young men.[5] As this 'way of life' that Piterman mentions becomes less defined and more malleable as a term in contemporary Australia, there have been many attempts to address the relevance of this hyper-masculine and at times aggressive form of behaviour. This may be in part due to the Anglo-Australian construction of Australian male values losing strength in the reality of an increasingly multicultural, present-day society that is subject to accelerating (feminist) demands for gender equality. However, current right-wing Prime Minister Tony Abbott's 'shirtfront' comments to the Russian Prime Minister in 2014[6] suggest this aggressive form of masculinity is still a perpetuated (and remotely accepted) form of national identity.

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3   As historian John Hirst argues in *The Monthly*, '[Russel] Ward considers that the outback workers – shearers, stock men, drovers – adopted in the purest form the national characteristics that interest him. Yet it was the city larrikins, whom he does not mention, that made anti-authority an art form and who set a style which has become nationally admired.' John Hirst, "An oddity from the start: Convicts and national character", *The Monthly*, July 2008, accessed December 22, 2014, http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2008/july/1277335186/john-hirst/oddity-start

4   Hannah Piterman, 'The larrikin lives on at the expense of Australian female leadership', *The Conversation*, 4 December 2014, accessed December 25, 2014, http://theconversation.com/the-larrikin-lives-on-at-the-expense-of-australian-female-leadership-33740

5   The Gallipoli conflict, of which we commemorate the 100th anniversary in 2015, is seen as a defining event in Australian history. It was a devastating First World War conflict in 1915, in which young men from Australia and New Zealand (along with other Allied forces) were ordered to fight an embedded Turkish army. They suffered many casualties. The conflict also marks the first use of the term 'ANZAC troops' (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps), often referred to in the nationalist context of possessing the 'Anzac spirit'. This is explained by academic Robert Manne: 'Australians were innocent and fit; stoical and laconic; irreverent in the face of hidebound authority; naturally egalitarian and disdainful of British class differences.' The difficulty of this myth's perpetuation is that it is once again a male-centric national identity that borrows from the valorised heroism of the pioneers, this time through a combative or military mode.
Robert Manne, "The war myth that made us", Opinion, *The Age*, April 25, 2007, accessed February 3, 2013, http://www.theage.com.au/news/robert-manne/the-war-myth-that-made-us/2007/04/24/1177180648069.html

6   As ABC political reporter Andrew Greene explains, 'A shirtfront, an Australian Rules football term, is a "head-on charge aimed at bumping an opponent to the ground", according to the *Macquarie Dictionary*.' Andrew Greene, "Prime Minister Tony Abbott vows to 'shirtfront' Russian president Vladimir Putin at Brisbane G20 summit", *ABC News online*, 14 October 2014, accessed 20 October 2014, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-10-13/abbott-to-shirtfront-vladimir-putin-at-brisbane-g20/5810002

In response to an assault in 2014 on the streets of Sydney, journalist Catharine Lumby remarks:

> Australia remains a highly gendered society. For young men, in particular, the public models of acceptable masculinity are still constrained by norms that privilege competitiveness, toughness and an indifference to harm.[7]

So where does this violence stem from? It certainly exists in other countries, but there seems to be a residual aggressive form of masculinity that exists on the periphery of Australian culture. Our sporting culture, which often bands young men together in displays of strength, has at times led to unsavoury accounts of assault, group sex and rape, and has revealed misogynistic attitudes towards women. It is perhaps overly simplistic to blame a 'macho' culture of hetero-masculinity for these behaviours, but there seems to be a historical basis for valuing strength and male heroism through labour, if only through visual representation. This then gives validation to the kinds of behaviours that seem to flow from this 'type' of masculinity. I will now turn to the past once more in an attempt to establish a background for this perpetuated form of masculinity – one that stems from the myths we hold as part of the iconography of Australian-ness.

THE ANTI-HERO, STRAYA AND THE OUTBACK MYTH

I now arrive at the lawless individuals termed 'bushrangers'; specifically, the mythology around Ned Kelly. Kelly, the outlaw settler, occupies an extraordinary space in the Australian imagination. Australian history academics Sarah Pinto and Leigh Boucher suggest that:

> In terms of dominant (Australian) cultural narratives of the twentieth century and beyond, no other violent white man has occupied more space than Edward 'Ned' Kelly (1855–1880), underdog, bushranger, outlaw, murderer and hero.[8]

As Pinto and Boucher underline, Kelly is a cultural icon who is thoroughly anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian, yet wholly 'Australian'. He fulfils the ideals of the male anti-hero through his rejection of authority and the myth of a wandering, brooding man in nature. Ned Kelly is the most recognisable of masculine narratives in white Australia, as is the iconography of the armour he wore. His story, much like other perpetuated mythologies of the bushranger – such as Mad Dog Morgan[9] – is that of a

7   Catharine Lumby, "No country for young men: notions of gender must evolve"*, Sydney Morning Herald,* January 3 2014, accessed February 27, 2014, http://www.smh.com.au/comment/no-country-for-young-men-notions-of-gender-must-evolve-20140102-307rq.html

8   Sarah Pinto and Leigh Boucher, "Fighting for Legitimacy: Masculinity, political voice and Ned Kelly", *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* vol. 10, no. 1, (January 2006): 1.

9   As academic John McQuilton explains, 'Daniel (Dan) Morgan (c. 1830–1865), bushranger, was probably Jack Fuller, born at Appin, New South Wales, the illegitimate son of Mary Owen and George Fuller. Morgan frequently targeted the region's squatters, especially those who were believed to be hard masters, and delighted in humiliating them. During raids, he insisted that employees be fed and given drink.' The popular notion of Morgan is that he was, as folklore now terms him, the 'traveller's friend'. McQuilton goes on to say, 'Morgan's time at large owed much to his bush skills, an inept and undermanned police force and an effective "telegraph" of sympathizers and supporters among the shepherds and stockmen in the region.' Philippe Mora directed the film *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976), based on the book *Morgan: The Bold Bushranger* (1974) by Margaret Carnegie. The film featured a charismatic Dennis Hopper as Morgan, as well as iconic Australian actors David Gulpilil and Jack Thompson. The tagline for the film reads: 'Ferociously violent – unexpectedly kind. Ruthless bandit or rebel hero? An outlaw's outlaw with a score to settle.'

perceived affinity with nature (through his evading capture) and 'gentlemanly charm' towards women. This is coupled with the reassuring expectation, or myth, that these men did not spill 'innocent' blood. Underlying all of this is the acceptance of violence through the vehicle of the alienated working-class Irish-Australian – he's oppressed by society, which justifies his aggression, lawlessness and, later, his folk status. His famous last words, upon his capture and sentence to death by hanging, are claimed to be 'Such is life' – a hopeless, or at least resigned, term of endearing carelessness that has been appropriated as a potent symbol of Australian identity, especially for white males. This slogan, coupled with the Southern Cross flag iconography – originally derived from the Eureka Stockade rebellion – has become an iconography synonymous with nationalistic sentiment. Meanwhile, 'Straya', a term that deliberately scrutinises Aussie behaviours and values – derived from the broad accent pronunciation of the word 'Australia' – is an often misused, sometimes humorous slang phrase that reveals much about current impressions of the nation. 'Googling' the term reveals images, such as Figure 1, that sum up the male-driven stupidity or larrikinism, profanity and binge-drinking culture that is perpetuated through this term. Though what is hidden under this veil of light-hearted foolishness is perhaps a violence or a darkness that is both jingoistic and patriarchal.

Figure 1 Found meme: http://www.funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/3862783/Aussie+pride/

The artist who most famously explored the myth of Ned Kelly is mid-century painter Sidney Nolan, whose *Ned Kelly* series of 27 paintings presents the icon of an unsettled, commonly lone white male protagonist. As we will see, this is a consistent motif in Australian landscape narratives, particularly in the films I will

John McQuilton, "Morgan, Daniel (Dan) (1830–1865)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, accessed March 19, 2012, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/morgandaniel-dan-13109/text23717

discuss in the next section. As seen in Figure 2, the landscape in Nolan's work of this motif is a beautiful but often desolate and empty one, devoid of human presence. Kelly is the lone cultural icon that makes this landscape accessible; he is the aggressor, the conqueror of the Australian 'frontier'.[10] Australian art historian David Hansen remarks on this emptiness:

> This preoccupation with the (empty) landscape can be seen as reflecting our [Australian] society's environmental schizophrenia; we have to work through a conceptual division between culture and nature.[11]

Hansen implies that the depiction of an 'empty' landscape by non-indigenous artists is one that reflects both a desire to see oneself *in* this environment, to connect, and also the gaping cultural disconnect. He goes on to say: 'For the original inhabitants of [Australia] there are no such contradictions.'[12] This understanding recalls for me a dialogue in John Hillcoat's film *The Proposition* (2005). A colonial officer interrogates a group of captured Aboriginal Australians about how long they have been 'hiding' in the mountain ranges, to which one replies, 'We aren't hiding – we live in the ranges.' And, when asked how long they have been living there, the same captive simply replies, 'Always.'
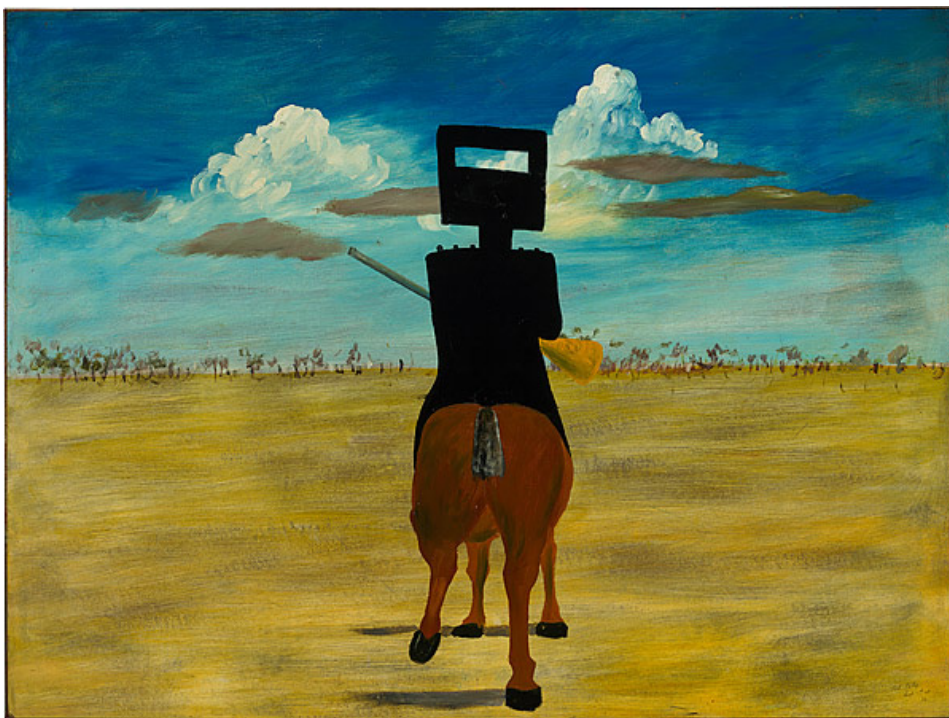

Figure 2 Sidney Nolan, *Ned Kelly*, 1946, enamel paint on composition board, 90.8 x 121.5 cm

I am drawn by Hansen's argument to a 1975 interview that originally appeared in the summer 1976 issue of *South by Southwest*, a publication of the English and History departments at the University of

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10   The word 'frontier' is derived from the classical Latin root *frons* (front or forepart) by way of the later medieval Latin term *fronteria* (frontier, or line of battle). I will discuss this term later in relation to its use in the colonisation of the Americas, where it is most conventionally applied.

11   David Hansen, 'The Land, the Present', in *The Face of Australia: The land & the people, the past & the present* (NSW: Child & Associates, 1988) 65.

12   Hansen, *The Face of Australia*, 65

Melbourne. The interview, conducted between department colleagues Katharina Graw and David Loeb, was reproduced in a 2010 issue of *Art and Australia.* Here, Loeb makes the 'once-controversial' claim to deny the existence of '[t]he Outback'.[13] In the interview with Graw, he argues that to depict a 'frontier' in Australia is to reinforce myths that are counterproductive to meaningful post-colonial discourse. It is the combative mode of white – in his words, 'right-wing' and 'racist' – representation that Loeb sees as overlooking the existence of a dispossessed indigenous people and not forming a known understanding of the land. He says:

> The Outback is not a place of life, or, rather, of any life that is worth knowing. This is the representation and it is disturbing not only in its dystopic rendering but also in its negation of the other.[14]

Essentially Loeb's argument comes down to an ongoing depiction of a landscape that denies the existence of indigenous people, fed by the anxiety-induced myths of an unresolved or unreconciled history of Australian colonial settlement. By denying the existence of the Outback, he says, 'so too does the desire to possess it' dwindle and, in doing so, the 'repressed can be freed'.[15] It is a rather forceful notion to deny a terminology so embedded in the Australian vernacular, but it, along with Hansen's argument, pinpoints a prevailing relationship to aspects of Australia's environment and culture that is full of uncertainty and a lack of understanding. It is a cultural anxiety that manifests in the relentless perpetuation of myth and feeds into an uncertainty surrounding both national identity and a sense of belonging. In the *Art and Australia* interview, Loeb and Graw also make mention of *Wake in Fright*, a classic Australian film from 1971 that I will now turn my attention to.

WAKE IN FRIGHT

Cinema in the last few decades has provided various narratives that examine, visualise and perhaps perpetuate, even as they seek to question, a construction of masculinity, particularly in uniquely Australian terms. Australian New Wave[16] films such as *Wake in Fright* (1971) – directed by a Canadian, Ted Kotcheff, but based on the 1961 novel by Kenneth Cook – have attained cult status in Australia and globally for their raw portrayal of the landscape and facets of Australian identity. The film, aptly re-named *Outback* for American audiences, follows protagonist John Grant (Gary Bond), a teacher posted to an outback school who becomes stranded in a nearby mining town after losing his money in a game of

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13   Jarrod Rawlins and Lisa Radford, "The Outback Denier", in *Art and Australia*, issue 4:1, 2010, 116–7.

14   Rawlins, "The Outback Denier", 116–7.

15   Rawlins, "The Outback Denier", 117.

16   This is commonly referred to as the 'renaissance of the Australian film industry' and occurred in the early 1970s due to government investment in the industry, which had suffered post-war financial difficulty. It signalled a prolific period of film production set in the Australian landscape, and is also associated with the rise of Ozploitation films – low-budget films that drew on colloquial notions of Australian identity and the landscape, and also took advantage of the introduction of the 'R' rating in Australia. These films include *Mad Max* and *Wake in Fright,* with horror film *Wolf Creek* (2005) an extension of this movement. Australian Government, 'Film in Australia: The New Wave', accessed January 3, 2015, http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/film-in-australia

'two-up'.[17] Not very well received in Australia at the time of its release, the film is now highly regarded, and has one of the highest ratings of any film on online film forum Rotten Tomatoes.[18]

In a recent interview, director Kotcheff remarks on this belated appreciation:

> When I screened *Wake in Fright* after it had disappeared for 25 years, I was deeply intrigued by the despair in it. Despair over humanity. Ironically, Australian audiences have come to appreciate that darkness now, and are always thrilled to discuss it afterwards.[19]

This despair is related to the inhospitable 'Outback' landscape these characters inhabit and seem to be bound by – particularly John Grant as he attempts to escape his prison-like, seemingly lawless existence. The places he inhabits are liminal, the school he must teach at is timeless. As seen in Figure 3, even the clock has no hands.

Figure 3 Ted Kotcheff, *Wake in Fright*, 1971, film still

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17   'Two-up' is a uniquely Australian gambling pastime (popular with my grandfather). It is a simple coin-toss game involving betting on 'tails' (odds) or 'heads' (evens) as two coins are tossed into the air by a 'spinner'. As tourism website Explore Australia elaborates: 'Australian soldiers played two-up in the trenches during World War I and this gambling game is now played in pubs on Anzac Day to commemorate Australian diggers. Explore Australia, 'Guide to Anzac Day Pubs', April 24 2012, accessed November 5, 2014, http://www.exploreaustralia.net.au/blog/2012/04/24/guide-to-anzac-day-pubs/#sthash.aBmGlhA3.dpuf

18   Rotten Tomatoes, a popular online film-reviewing platform, gave the film 100% on its 'Tomatometer' – the percent age of approved critics who have given a movie a positive review. The critics' consensus of the film is summarised as such: 'A disquieting classic of Australian cinema, *Wake in Fright* surveys a landscape both sun-drenched and ruthlessly dark.' Rotten Tomatoes, 'Wake In Fright', Flixster Inc, accessed November 15, 2014, http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wake_in_fright/?search=wake%20in%20fright

19   James Kloda, "Aussie Rules: Ted Kotcheff reflects on his 1971 classic *Wake in Fright*", accessed October 10, 2014, http://www.theskinny.co.uk/film/interviews/aussie-rules-ted-kotcheff-reflects-on-his-1971-classic-wake-in-fright

Given the aesthetic likeness of this film's landscape to American and Canadian 'frontier'[20] films, it is worth noting that the landscapes in those narratives share striking similarities in the context of British colonisation – namely: an indigenous population that is often misrepresented or absent altogether, the portrayal of a harsh environment through the landscape, and a sense of lawlessness. On the film's re-release in 2009, *New York Times* reviewer James Guida writes that Kotcheff 'has partly explained his uncanny feeling for the culture by observing that both Canada and Australia are nations where, instead of liberating, space imprisons'.[21] This reiterates the argument of film theorist David Melbye, who, in the context of landscape allegory, makes a strong claim that can similarly be applied to historical representations of the Australian environment by non-indigenous artists:

> The nineteenth century American assimilation of the European sublime depiction of landscape was tailored to American notions of western expansionism.[22]

He links this assimilation of the sublime to a form of 'cultural propaganda', as he terms it, while claiming that cinema applies this approach through its use of landscape allegory. The depiction of an infinite outback in *Wake in Fright*, as well as the liminal, 'peripheral' zone of such films as Peter Weir's famed *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975), are just a few examples of landscape depiction that denies indigenous presence, instead manifesting an eternal struggle and, at the same time, a yearning for comfort within the constructed cultural landscape. As Melbye elaborates:

> In these films, the natural settings go beyond the conventional function of narrative backdrop and become characters themselves within this allegorical context.[23]

As he continues, 'the adversary here is the indigenous landscape itself'.[24] In dystopic terms, the unseen powerful aggressor is the landscape; the 'civilised' John Grant in *Wake in Fright* descends into madness through it – the heat, the flies, alcohol and the strange townspeople all metaphorically consume him (Figure 4) and he attempts suicide. It is this action that spits him out into freedom and liberates him from his bleak, dystopic reality.

20   In North American development, where the term is most commonly attributed, 'frontier' refers to a region at the edge of a settled area. It is a transitional zone of (commonly colonial) pioneering – and, one could argue, a 'liminal' space. The term 'frontier wars' (also known as our 'history wars') has evolved in recent times from debate surrounding the myth of peaceful settlement in Australia and the indiscriminate massacres that occurred. This is a grey subject in Australia, with recent scholarship suggesting the number of Indigenous Australian fatalities may have been much higher than previously estimated. That said, the phrase 'frontier' is also used to refer to remote areas in Australia, with terms such as 'the Outback' also sometimes called a 'frontier'.

21   James Guida, "Wake in Fright: Prepare to be disturbed, Mate", *The New Yorker,* October 4 2012, accessed January 24, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/wake-in-fright-prepare-to-be-disturbed-mate

22   David Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema: From wilderness to wasteland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 15.

23   Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema,* 112.

24   Melbye, *Landscape Allegory in Cinema,* 112.

Figure 4 Ted Kotcheff, *Wake in Fright*, 1971, film still

Figure 5 George Miller, *Mad Max*, 1979, film still

MAD MAX

The first *Mad Max* film (1979) directed by George Miller is set in a not-too-distant dystopian future in low-density regional Australia (that is, 'the bush'). It is a future where gangs rule the highway on the fringes of settlement, basic resources – notably petrol – are scarce and order is maintained by a central police force. This force is strangely managed by a British authority figure, in an apparent nod to the monarch. Max (Mel Gibson) is the central character, the 'hero' of the force, and ultimately suffers the

price: a gang kills his wife and child. This justifies his descent into violence and his becoming 'Mad Max' (Figure 5). There is, however, a nobility to Max's character throughout the *Mad Max* trilogy. With little dialogue, his silent, brooding demeanour and sense of moral fortitude towards weaker characters – that are not the 'villains' – justifies his treatment of the antagonists, who are killed en masse in spectacular fashion. Labelled within the sub-genre of 'Road Movies', there is a sense of mobility in the *Mad Max* films. This sense of transience occurs in *The Rover* (2014) – mentioned in the next section – as a new 'road movie', built on the legacy of the *Mad Max* trilogy.

The opening narrator in *Mad Max 2* (1981) states that '[o]nly those mobile enough to scavenge and brutal enough to pillage would survive' in what is an aftermath of war and economic decline. We see Max in a ruined highway landscape complete with kangaroo roadkill and a looted truck graffitied with the statement 'The vermin have inherited the Earth' (Figure 6). Max is a 'man haunted by his past', in a logic that is typical of these narratives. We know of Max's past from the first instalment of the trilogy, and he retains a small sense of morality from his role as a police officer in that original *Mad Max* film.

Figure 6 George Miller, *Mad Max 2: The road warrior*, 1981, film still

Acclaimed Australian artist Shaun Gladwell borrowed the cult motif of *Mad Max* for his 2009 work *Interceptor Surf Sequence* (Figure 7). Gladwell created a replica of Max's iconic 'Interceptor' to restage Max in the Outback landscape. Set in slow motion from a fixed vantage point (we assume a following vehicle), Gladwell's character crawls from the cab of the Interceptor as it drives (apparently unmanned) towards the infinite Outback horizon. Blair French, writing on Gladwell for the 2009 Venice Biennale, where this work was first shown, discusses the icon of Max and the Interceptor 'as an emblem of the free roaming outlaw, embraced as a form of self-image in white male Australian mythology (Ned Kelly had his home-made iron helmet, Max his self-modified V8 Interceptor)'.[25] With time and place conflated by no distin-

25   Blair French, "The Curvature of the Earth", Australian Venice Biennale, accessed August 5, 2014,

guishing features other than the Interceptor and a lone figure – what French calls Gladwell's 'disavowal of any sense of progress or destination' – Gladwell evokes the 'drifter' character in a simple, lyrical performance of body and landscape.[26] French goes on to say of the character Max:

> Max is a bricolage bound in black leather, a composite drawn from the cultural imaginary: lawman, outlaw, bush ranger, boundary rider, wanderer, explorer, avenger.[27]

Gladwell's appropriation of the Mad Max character evokes both Australian mythology and a cult icon of popular culture, as well as the sublime nature of the Australian interior. Gladwell positions the character in front of us, in what can be seen as a reference to a painterly tradition of the 'Rückenfigur', or 'back figure'.[28]

As the two-channel video progresses, one of the panels presents an encroaching storm, with the Australian white male hero hurtling towards the sublime beauty and power of nature with his arms outstretched in a gesture of defiance, or perhaps submission.

Figure 7 Shaun Gladwell, *Interceptor Surf Sequence*, 2009, HD video (still), 00:27:42

What is also important to note in these narratives, even in Gladwell's re-staging, is the play between comfort and anxiety, utopia and dystopia; in *Wake in Fright*, this is the main character's daydream of the coast and his girlfriend countered by the harsh reality of the fictional Outback town of Bundanyabba. In *Mad Max*, the characters look for a stable place of being and basic survival – a utopia. This is something

26   French, "The Curvature of the Earth".

27   French, "The Curvature of the Earth".

28   Supported by Blair French in his essay, Gladwell's use of a 'back figure' can be seen as a romantic reference to Caspar David Friedrich, a German Romantic painter who depicted sublime scenes of nature with commonly lone figures standing in contemplation with their backs turned to the 'viewer'.

that is perpetually taken away from Max, but he selflessly risks his life for innocent people in their quest for survival – Max, like the Ned Kelly mythology and Guy Pearce's character in *The Rover*, has nothing to lose.

THE ROVER

In David Michôd's film *The Rover* of 2014, Australian actor Guy Pearce plays a former farmer drifting from town to town in an Australia '10 years after the collapse' – of which we know nothing, only that soldiers keep order while workers from all over the world have migrated here to work in the mines (Figure 8). Pearce commonly plays these roles – namely, a damaged or troubled male protagonist with little dialogue, such as his character in the aforementioned film by John Hillcoat, *The Proposition*. In *The Rover*, his relationship with a second protagonist, Rey, played by Robert Pattinson, is a fraught one – Pearce is a damaged, aggressive anti-hero and Pattinson plays a sensitive, mentally handicapped young man whose companions abandoned him during a robbery. As seen in Figure 9, the terrain they navigate is dusty, ragged and seemingly infinite.

Figure 8 David Michôd, *The Rover*, 2014, film still

Figure 9 David Michôd, *The Rover*, 2014, film still

The world these characters navigate is one where few women are present (aside from at brothels) and when they are, they appear as amplified maternalistic archetypes, such as a grandmother and a doctor (or veterinarian) – both of whom Pearce threatens with violence. Vigilantes roam the Outback, and there are hints of the pseudo-religious; in one scene, shot looking out the car window, what appears to be crucified people line the side of the road as the protagonists drive to their destination (Figure 10). Despite the setting of a similar Outback environment, there are none of the cultural trappings of Australian men as there are in *Wake in Fright* – only raw forms of masculine aggression are on display. The atmosphere in this film is deliberately global, despite the distinctly Australian landscape. There are several American and Chinese characters, and Mandarin dialogue is spoken, suggesting a strong Chinese influence in this dystopian action-drama.

Figure 10 David Michôd, *The Rover*, 2014, film still

Perhaps this is something that continues, or at least perpetuates, in depictions of Australia, despite multiculturalism – the notion of the 'outsider', and its associated diasporic tendencies, is played out through the representation of Australian migrants, as well as white Australia and its imperialistic past. Academic Bill Ashcroft concludes his paper on Australian 'Ways of Seeing' with this point:

> Embedded in many migrant ways of seeing, the struggle between the dystopian and utopian is still played out. The binary of paradise and prison still emerges in visual and literary representations of Australia.[29]

This binary is played out most chillingly in *Wake in Fright* through the protagonist and his Sydney beach flashbacks of his girlfriend (paradise), and the cyclical hellish reality of the Outback town, 'the Yabba' (prison). Pearce's character in *The Rover* must overcome various threats in what is purely a lawless and oppressive 'prison-like' landscape, despite the openness. It is a vast, ragged, inhospitable terrain of the in-ner psyche of Pearce's character, to align with Melbye's landscape allegory. He (Pearce) is not at peace by the film's end; the bleak conclusion only manifests in him being able to bury his dog – the only loyalty he maintains in the film, and the only upholding of order and values otherwise lacking in the dystopic future society.

29   Bill Ashcroft, "Seeing Australia: Learning and unlearning the visible world", p17, Chapter 1 in *Visualising Australia: Images, Icons, Imaginations,* vol.11 (Trier: WVT, 2014) 19-38.

Figure 11 Warwick Baker, *Molonglo River self-portrait*, 2009 C-type photograph, 120 x 100 cm

Another contemporary Australian artist whose work evokes sensitivity and vulnerability towards the Australian landscape is Melbourne-based photographer Warwick Baker. His work *Molonglo River self-portrait* (Figure 11) challenges the dominant form of hetero-masculinity perpetuated in Australian culture – namely, the white, hyper-masculine aggressor and yet seemingly harmless larrikin. Baker's photograph evokes the awkwardness of youth, male nudity and voyeurism (implied through the device of photography). It is unique in that it does not convey a longing or erotic gaze – something that many queer male photographers evoke.

Sydney-based Liam Benson is another Australian photographer who identifies as a queer artist, and he works through themes of national identity, race and gender in a forthright and predominantly jovial manner. In *Coat of Arms* (Figure 12)*,* Benson faces the camera, set among native wattle, and returns our gaze confidently; he has feminine features, is well groomed and wears a gold tiara featuring the coat of arms. Benson's *Such is Life* (Figure 13) is an even more sexually charged self-portrait of the artist as a kind of cultural icon of hetero-masculinity, exemplified through his deliberate use of 'Aussie' iconography,

such as tattoos of Ned Kelly's alleged last words – 'Such is Life' – and the Southern Cross[30]. A classically posed Benson, evoking Greek and Renaissance-era depictions of heroic males much like my *Arcadia* series, prominently displays his muscular features, albeit in a more tongue-in-cheek fashion than my series.

Figure 12 Liam Benson, *Coat of Arms*, 2009, C-Type photograph, 90 x 120 cm

Figure 13 Liam Benson, *Such is Life*, 2011, C-Type photograph, 83 x 119 cm, detail

Drew Pettifer is another artist whose photographs and video work of young men similarly challenge hetero-masculinity and sexuality, although laden with a hint (more apparent in some works) of queer desire and control. Often depicting relaxed, naked abandon, his photographs of young men are typically tender portrayals that reveal both a longing by the artist and a playful sense of virility. His video work

*Mapping the Interior: In search of an inland sea (*2013) presents an alternative view of Pettifer's practice, and of a familiar Australian narrative of tragedy and despair. *Mapping the Interior* (Figure 14) refers to a narrative suitably utopian in its intent to find an inland sea in the centre of Australia: the expedition led by the explorer and colonial soldier Charles Sturt in August 1844. The campaign failed miserably, and the incongruous vision of a boat being led through a desert by a group of men is re-staged here by Pettifer in a three-screen panoramic video installation. Although sexualised in short schoolboy shorts and without shirts, these skinny young men strain in despair as they carry a boat through the red desert interior. (It is worth noting that, on closer inspection, aforementioned artist Warwick Baker can be seen as one of the doomed young men leading the boat through the sand.) A foreboding soundtrack only increases the anxiety of the boys' wholly futile yet seemingly determined attempt to push on in search of an unknown paradise. Pettifer has invoked a timeless landscape, despite the title's historical reference and the men's actions, which seem forced, as if the men are under duress. As academic Edward Colless describes in his catalogue essay 'Ship of Fools':

> The masculinity on display here has little to do with any Stoic capacity for endurance. The deserted, desic-cated drama in this video invokes no Mad Max valour or villainy.[1]

This is a marked departure from the heroic male protagonists of Australia's past, and the expected fortitudes of Australian masculinity. Pettifer simultaneously references the anxiety and despair of narrow-minded frontier explorers in the Australian landscape and reveals an evaporation of the hyper-masculine expectations of Australian men. These vulnerable new-age men are victims of both the artist and the landscape itself.
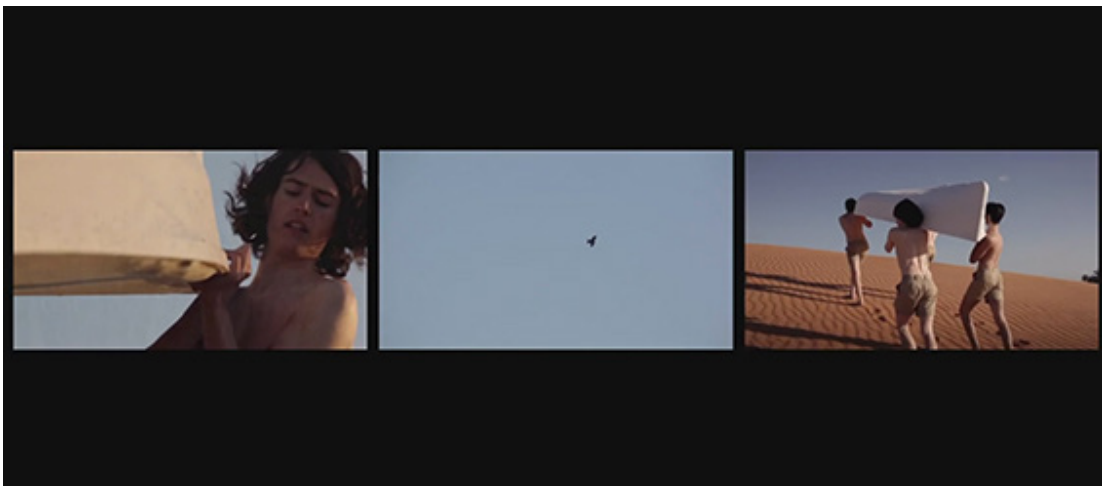

Figure 14 Drew Pettifer, *Mapping the Interior: In search of an inland sea*, 2013, three-channel HDV, 18:10 min (still)

Reflecting on the work of these white Australian male artists that I have selected, both Baker's and Benson's photographic self-portraiture functions to subvert the hetero-normative form of masculinity in Australia, through self-portraiture and performative gesture. Benson achieves this through a deliberate

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1   Edward Colless, "Ship of Fools", catalogue essay, Victorian College of the Arts, accessed January 12, 2015, http://drewpettifer.com/Ship-of-Fools

sexualisation; Baker's work functions through sensitively reluctant, passive and almost forced gesture. Meanwhile, Pettifer's work operates on the level of desire, control and vulnerability. What draws these works together, aside from their role in possibly redefining the expectations of 'Aussie' masculinity, is the placement of the figure in nature – specifically, the bush. This is where Australian masculinity has come to be defined, and perhaps where it will need to be redefined.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, examining dystopic, post-apocalyptic films such as *Mad Max* and its recent counterpart *The Rover*, I have aimed to demonstrate that dystopic landscape narratives featuring a decline of civilisation are often set in the Australian bush or 'Outback'. I discussed that this environment, with its history of violence, hostility and suffering, feeds into post-colonial representations of reworked historical narratives and characters. The themes that arise are often ones of dispossession – that is, a perceived lack of belonging, and a sense of transience and movement from place to place to leave behind an unspecified or vague 'threat'.

Using this research, one can suggest the vigilantism associated with bushrangers and drifting male protagonists are given new life within 'counter-utopian' (paradise/prison) narratives that borrow from these mythologies, while presenting new ideas surrounding identity and belonging to the 'land'. I have shown that the embattled, troubled masculine protaganist seems to carry with him a 'burden', either physical or emotional, while not committing to any serious ritual or activity in one specified location. These narratives reveal a perceived rebellion against a rule of law, and an embrace or acknowledgement of the rough, difficult physical landscape, which is often presented as a lawless, godless land. This supports Melbye's argument for landscape allegory in which natural, outdoor settings serve as outward manifestations of characters' inner subjective states, particularly by western countries with imperialistic pasts.

It seems likely that narratives displaying dystopian qualities in Australia are prevalent not only because of its geographical features, climate and colonial history, but also because of the enduring form of masculinity. Obviously we can make an assumption that these factors have informed the nature of this masculinity as well, which can reveal an emotional price of colonisation on the perception of national (male) identity. It seems important, then, that the expanded ideas of masculinity presented in the last section of this chapter are continued; given that these young male artists are around the same generation, which may suggest they represent a generational shift towards a new and more productive engagement with the idea of the masculine in Australian visual culture. Of course, the trajectory of Australian masculinity is a dense and broad one, and I did not introduce painters such as Adam Cullen, Michael Zavros or Ben Quilty, whose fellowship with the Australian Defense Forces produced a revealing series of portraits of male soldiers returning or serving in Afghanistan and other conflicts.

Also of note to this paper is indigenous photo-media artist Christian Thompson, whose portraits are in a sense a post-colonial re-authoring of indigenous identity on the one side, and a probing of masculinity in the 21st Century on the other. Films I could of mentioned include the globally renowned *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) starring Paul Hogan, whose status as a 'true-blue Aussie' was used in a wide ranging Advertisement campaign for the National Tourism Board. Also of note is racial gang-based film *Romper Stomper* (1992) starring Russel Crowe.