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Whither the Australian Western? Performing Genre and the Archive in *Outback and Beyond*

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Introduction

We open with a wide shot: a lone house sits, tremulous, on the edge of the desert; cattle are clustered in dusty yards; men on horses crack whips and rope cattle; women brew coffee and scold grubby-faced children; droving teams lead stock across open plains; telegraph and railway lines track across the wilderness; painted natives watch from rocky cliffs, they stream down hillsides in attack formation; wagon trains form circles to fend off their attackers; gunfire and bloodshed ensue.

These images are most commonly associated with the Hollywood Western; through their iconographic function they seem to speak of an American history, an American way of life, the coming of an American civilization – Andre Bazin called the Western the “American film *par excellence*” (Bazin 140); Edward Buscombe and Kevin Mulroy call it America’s “creation story” (Buscombe & Mulroy 63). And yet Australia’s media archives, its various state and national collections of feature films and documentaries, photographs and documents deemed important to and representative of “the Nation,” contain many such images. These images reflect an Australian history that in its broad strokes – colonial invasion and settlement, suppression of Indigenous peoples, and the installation of the technical and urban infrastructure of modernity – bears striking resemblance to the history of the United States.

In this paper, I wish to explore the role of the Western genre in Australian cinema. Given the broad similarities in colonial history between the U.S.

and Australia, and the fact that both Westerns and Western-like imagery can be found in the cinematic and media archives of both countries, we may ask whether these similarities extend to how each country has *used* the Western and its iconography. While the Western is clearly most closely associated with the United States, in the 1960s and 70s a number of other countries developed very concerted and focused contributions to the genre. Italy's "Spaghetti Western" is the most well known, but the revisionist Westerns from both West and East Germany (the "Sauerkraut Westerns") are equally vital, and represent very specific political projects of national re-visioning (see Calloway et al). Likewise in Poland from the 1950s onwards, poster art for American and European Westerns was developed into a visual grammar that employed Western iconography in politically subversive and critical ways, and the Polish peoples' familiarity with the political use of Western iconography has been credited as an element in the Solidarity party's success in the 1989 election, when an image of Gary Cooper in *High Noon* was used to signal that Poland's time as a nation had come (Buscombe & Mulroy 63; Fox 69). The Western's "capacity to accommodate many different kinds of meaning" that Cawelti outlines operates not only in terms of narrative and characterization, but in contexts of production and reception as well, opening the Western up as a storehouse of narrative and iconography that is available for complex international remediation (Cawelti 9).

It is in this broad international context of the use of the Western and its iconography that I ask about the role of the Western in Australian cinema. I will do this in two ways. In the first part of this paper I address the history and development of the Western in Australia, exploring the factors that have both propelled and limited the development of the genre in Australia. This historical exploration is necessary background for the second part of this paper, in which I explore the use of the Western and its iconography in Australia as part of a revisionist strategy, through discussion of the live audio-visual performance project *Outback and Beyond*.

Outback and Beyond is produced by myself and sound artist Mike Cooper, it consists of a live remix of archival footage of the outback from the National Film and Sound Archive and the State Library of South Australia, set to a live soundtrack of deconstructed Blues and electronics. [1] In its use of archival materials depicting the outback, the project seeks to construct a "live Australian Western" – it uses imagery designed to recall the settings and themes of the Western but to place it in a specifically Australian milieu. The project also features a libretto and

images that tell the story of Charles Todd, the British astronomer and engineer who built the Overland Telegraph from Adelaide to Darwin in the 1870s. The Overland Telegraph was a massive undertaking and a key element in the technical infrastructure that was to usher in a modern Australia, and in the context of *Outback and Beyond* it instantiates the logic and use of the Western as a mechanism of nation-building and national identity. *Outback and Beyond*, then, is explicitly designed to address the question of the Australian Western. The project postulates a live Australian Western in order to probe representations of Australian history and national identity, and provide a method for seeing these things differently.

The Western

There is little question that Australia has produced Westerns throughout its cinematic history. Tom O'Regan and Garry Gillard both note that bushranging and drover films have been made in Australia from the beginnings of cinema until recently, and that these films constitute a strong Australian contribution to the Western genre (O'Regan 168-170; Gillard). In the 1940s and 50s the British Ealing Studios made a number of Westerns in Australia – Harry Watt's *The Overlanders* (1946) and *Eureka Stockade* (1949), and Ralph Smart's *Bitter Springs* (1950). Stuart Cunningham refers to Charles Chauvel's *Greenhide* (1926) as a "kangaroo Western" (Cunningham, in Limbrick 72). An ardent nationalist who sought to conduct an enterprise of nation-building through cinema, Chauvel also filmed the Western *Sons of Matthew* (1949), and was involved in the adaptation of Zane Grey's script for *Rangle River* (1936). Building on the now global phenomenon of relating a nation's contribution to the Western genre to some national foodstuff, there is even a Wikipedia entry for the "meat-pie Western," a term that dates back to 1979 with Eric Reade's *History and Heartburn*, where he refers to Russell Hagg's 1977 film *Raw Deal* as a meat-pie western (294). More recently, "revisionist" Westerns such as Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker* (2002) and John Hillcoat's *The Proposition* (2005) testify to a certain contemporary resonance of the genre.

The status of many of these films as "Australian Westerns," however, has often been a difficult one. Bill Routt has written extensively on Australia's bushranging films, noting the "cultural coincidences" that allow us to see the two genres' similarities in their historical frontier setting, their use of landscape, and the early 20th century period of their initial production; nevertheless, he argues against seeing bushranger films as derivative

“Bush Westerns” that take their lead entirely from the U.S. model, preferring to see them as a *Western-like* but indigenous genre that grew out of specifically Australian conditions (Routt “More Australian than Aristotelian”; Routt “Bush Westerns?”). Conversely, Bazin celebrates *The Overlanders* as an “excellent” but “paradoxical achievement,” undercutting its Australian-ness by preferring to see it as a derivative borrowing of certain themes and traits from the American model (142). And besides – as Peter Limbrick notes, *The Overlanders* was made as part of the Ealing Studios’ operations in Australia, and as such forms part of a transnational settler colonial project that is over-coded by both “the imperial and settler colonial history of Britain in Australia and [by] the imperial history of U.S. interests in Australia” (Limbrick 69). That is, while Ealings’ films were marketed and often received as “Australian Westerns,” their conditions of production mark them off as the product of an imperial British exploitation of colonial resources (Australia’s landscape and studio production facilities), and of Ealings’ battles with the U.S. for cinematic market share. Finally, even the contemporary revisionist Westerns are not safe from this equivocation, with their stylized use of violence and meditations on racism leading numerous critics to question the status of *The Tracker* and *The Proposition* as Westerns (Routt “Evening Redness”; McFarlane 62).

But if Australia has produced Westerns and *Western-like* films, or, as with the Ealing films, Westerns of a foreign provenance have been produced in Australia, what is more debatable is whether Australia has produced “the Western” in the way it has been understood, and used, in the U.S. While O’Regan argues that Australia’s bushranger and drover films make a strong contribution to an Australian version of the Western genre, he does not discuss what characterizes these films as Westerns, taking it as a given, presumably, that their historical bush setting and agrarian focus classes them *prima facie* as Westerns (168-170). In not interrogating their status *as* Westerns, though, O’Regan misses the opportunity to discuss how Westerns made in Australia function within Australian cinema and culture more broadly. In not asking the *question* of the Western – in not recognizing that there *is* a question to be asked, perhaps – the possibility of thinking the Western *differently* also does not arise. To ask *whither* the Australian Western is both to propose the possibility of such a thing as “the Australian Western” – which, if it exists, would have its own histories and traditions requiring examination, its *whence* – and to ask about the *future* of such a thing, the place to which it might be going, the contexts in which it could appear, the discourses it could mobilize, the uses it could be put to.

The Western is not just one genre among many, and not all genres are equal. The Western emerges as a cinematic genre at the very start of cinema – it is, arguably, foundational in terms of the development of a fictional entertainment cinema. It is also foundational thematically, being concerned, in its American manifestation at least, with the period in the middle of the 19th century when *modern* America was constituted. Jim Kitses nicely concatenates the economic, racial and territorial dynamics of the Western as a system of frontiers and thresholds: “the sudden rush of mining camps, the building of the railways, the Indian Wars, the cattle drives, the coming of the farmer” (Kitses 8). Out of the ashes of the Civil War, on the back of the abolition of slavery, as Westward expansion reaches capacity, the Western is instantiated as a mechanism for turning origin stories into myth, and embedding the politics of these stories within melodrama and nostalgia.

But this process of conducting historical mythography through narrative cinema is not without its contradictions and internal conflicts. While the 19th century notion of “Manifest Destiny” is clearly one of the underlying ideologies of the genre, it is not the case that the Western has simply been used to justify America’s Westward expansion and violent frontier clashes according to this doctrine. Most commentators on Westerns are explicit about the conflicts the Western explicitly or implicitly embodies, such as “the conflict between key American values like progress and success and the lost virtues of individual honor, heroism and natural freedom” (Cawelti 80). The set of structural antinomies Jim Kitses presents in *Horizons West* stem from a fundamental opposition between “wilderness” and “civilization,” but they are ambiguous in their distribution of positive value; where the wilderness might be associated with freedom, honour and self-knowledge in one moment, and set against the restrictive bounds of civilization, this self-knowledge quickly turns to self-interest and solipsism, and civilization’s valuation of community leads to social responsibility and democracy (Kitses 11).

John Rennie Short maps the development of these conflicts to three phases of the Western: the “early” Western of the 1900s-20s characterized by moral simplicity and a celebration of “the transformations of the wilderness and the coming of civilization” (180); the “mature” or Classic Western of the 1930s-50s, where the ambiguities evident in Kitses’ table fund a much more ambivalent depiction of the taming of the wilderness and the violence this requires; and the “late” or revisionist Western of the 1960s-onwards, where *contrition* towards this violence – especially

towards the treatment of America's First Nations peoples – is clearly evident, and “the western became a vehicle for social criticism” (Short 195).

These phases demonstrate the way in which the Western has functioned, over time, as a cultural “space” to work through issues and problems related to the historical formation of a national identity, a national character. The Western is fundamentally tied to “US ideologies of nation-building” (Short 179), where nation-building is understood both as a question of the large-scale territorial capture and infrastructural developments that underpin the coming of modernity, and the more cultural and personal question of national identity. As Kitses notes, “underlying the whole complex is the grave problem of identity that has special meaning for Americans (Kitses 11-12).

Whence the Australian Western?

When we ask whether Australian Westerns are used in the same way, however, it is difficult to draw a direct parallel to the U.S. usage of the genre. Felicity Collins and Therese Davis argue that despite Australia's “bush” tradition, Australian cinema “has no genre to compare with the Hollywood Western” (96). Likewise, Dale Hoskin observes:

Westerns have always looked uncomfortable in the Outback, almost as if they know that they're not really supposed to be there. Despite the superficial similarities to America's own Wild Frontier, there's something profoundly different about our country's dead heart, and the relative failure of introducing the western to our film culture would seem to back this up. (Hoskin 22)

In this section of this paper, I want to enumerate some of the factors that have complicated the development and status of Westerns in Australia. Many of these factors are well known in terms of Australian cinema history, and they underline the degree to which the fate of the Western in Australia is in large part the fate of its film industry more broadly. The Western is not alone in having suffered the rise of the Hollywood studio production and global distribution system; given the lack of a commercial studio system in Australia, if the Western did not fully emerge in Australia, neither did the musical, the thriller or the romance. As I will argue, however, there are factors outside Hollywood's dominance of early

cinema that influenced the fate of the Western in Australia, and either way, there is a heuristic value in asking specifically about the Western in Australia that exceeds recourse to explaining it away via reference to Hollywood.

With Hoskin, Collins and Davis, it is my contention that despite having made many Westerns, Australia never developed “the Western” as such, as a complex mechanism of national identity. Westerns in Australia tend to fall into only a few categories, and in all but the first category are few in number; the early bushranger and bush adventure films; Westerns shot in Australia by foreign production studios; contemporary re-makes of bushranger films; and contemporary revisionist Westerns. In terms of Short’s phases of the Western, what Australia lacks is the mature or Classic phase of the Western, a middle period where the genre is concertededly developed and where the historical, moral and racial issues it raises are dealt with in different ways. The significance of this lack, and the opportunities it may provide, are part of the heuristics of this paper.

To begin with, the argument “for.” As already noted, bushranger films have always been popular in Australia. This tradition begins in 1906 with the Tait brothers and *The Story of the Kelly Gang*. As Shirley and Adams note, having observed the popularity in Australia of Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), the Taites sought to capitalise on this interest in both narrative film and outlaw characters, and developed the already popular *Kelly Gang* stage play into a film that, at a reputed 4000 feet, was one of the longest films made in the world at that time (Shirley & Adams 16; Bertrand & Routt 8). The film was immensely successful, recouping its costs within a week, and paving the way for many similar iterations of the bushranger theme (Shirley & Adams 18). Fifteen bushranging films were made between 1906 and 1912, including numerous other *Kelly Gang* films plus others such as H.A Forsyth’s *Thunderbolt* (1910) and *Moonlight, the Bushranger* (1910), Charles McMahon’s *Robbery Under Arms* (1907) and Alfred Rolfe’s *Captain Starlight* (1911). These themes have continued to punctuate Australian cinematic production, with *Robbery Under Arms* being remade in 1920, 1957 and 1985, and ten Ned Kelly films being made between 1920 and 2003.

The popularity of bushranger films is not difficult to explain. In 1911, two thirds of Australia’s population lived outside the major cities, and so bush and outback settings coupled with anti-heroic characters set in opposition to clearly unjust and inept law-makers, held a clear appeal. The function of a “national predilection to favour the underdog” that Glen Lewis

argues stems from Australia's convict past, bushranger films appealed to a populace that was predominantly agrarian and was still processing the reverberations of the convict "stain" (Lewis 15). What makes these films Western-like is their bush and outback setting and their focus on a period of colonial development, which from a historical materialist perspective evidences their function as an exploration of the elements of a burgeoning national character (Routt "More Australian"). The Western is concerned with the origin stories of both a nation and its people. John Rennie Short succinctly summarises the Western's focus as "the battle between good and evil in the frontier zone between wilderness and civilization" (178), and we can clearly see how the bushranger film, as a kind of *risqué* moral melodrama located at the fringes of social and economic development, could fit within this schema.

This interest in bush settings and themes emanating from colonial development continued through the 1910s and 1920s. Snowy Baker, an adventure stunt actor who starred in a number of Westerns directed by American director Wilfred Lucas in the 1920s, was explicit in claiming the bush as a setting for an Australian Western genre, and seeking to conflate key elements of the American Western, including confrontation with native peoples, with their Australian counterparts:

We could weave a romance about the bush that would make Australian bush films sought after just as eagerly as in pictures dealing with Western life in America. We can stamp out our type the same as the Western type. There is a wonderful field. Even our Australian Aborigines have not yet been exploited as they should. (Baker, qtd. in Shirley & Adams 64)

However, despite this evident public taste for, and interest in, themes and settings that might have paved the way for a cinema of the Western in Australia, numerous factors intervened to ensure that this flowering of production and audience taste for bush settings and settler / colonial themes did not cohere into the kind of large-scale industry and genre focus that we see in the American Western. While Westerns clearly played a foundational role in the development of cinema in Australia, and developed in a manner comparable to the "early" phase of the genre in America, they were never given the opportunity to develop into a mature or Classic phase, and thus never reached either the thematic complexity or international market dominance witnessed in the U.S.

In the main, this lack of development was a function of structural

limitations within the Australian film industry itself, so the factors affecting the Australian Western are the same factors affecting the industry more broadly. These factors are well known and often cited by historians of Australian cinema. During the period 1911-13, film producer and distributor Australasian Films merged with cinema chain Union Theatres to form the vertically-integrated organisation popularly known as "the combine." While initially this vertical integration looked to be promising in terms of its potential to scaffold local production across distribution and exhibition, this potential did not eventuate. Instead, the period of the combine witnessed a massive rise in the import of American film content; in 1914, 50% of films shown in Australia were produced in the U.S., but by 1927 this figure had risen to 95% (Shirley & Adams 45, 96). The practice of "block booking," where American distributors forced local exhibitors to book "packages" of films, often sight unseen and up to a year or more in advance, underpinned this virtual monopoly of American content on Australian screens (Bertrand & Routt 14).

As Bertrand and Routt note, while some film historians argue for a "decline" in local film production as a result of the combine's activities, the production statistics of the period do not bear this argument out (15). Rather, where the combine really failed the Australian film industry was in its failure to develop international distribution networks:

The First World War provided the opportunity for an aggressive, vertically-integrated company to do just that, and by not taking it Australasian [Films], it seems to us, made security the better part of valour. That lost opportunity may well have been the most serious "effect" of the combine's policy. (Bertrand & Routt 15-16)

What this meant was that the relatively small local audience for Australian production was not supplemented by and expanded into international markets, meaning that local film production was not made viable on any large scale. What this also meant was that the uniquely Australian development of the Western, with its Australian bush and outback settings and its subversive outlaw ethos, was never given the chance to develop into a more complex or mature form at the national level, and was never able to become a serious international competitor for what "the Western" could mean and do on a political and cultural level.

But there were also other more thematic blockages placed in the way of the development of the Western genre and industry in Australia. While

bushranging was always a popular theme for early film, it was also contentious, with both public commentators and State governments frequently deeming it inappropriate and liable to encourage lawlessness (Lewis 12). When the first Kelly Gang film was released in 1906, screenings in some parts of Victoria were banned because of fears the film would “injure the reputations of people still living in the district” (Shirley & Adams 18). In 1912, an amendment to the NSW Theatre and Public Halls act outlawed the production of bushranger films, on the grounds that they represented Australian history and character in a negative light, and celebrated unsavoury characters. The 1922 film *When the Kellys Were Out* was banned that same year, prompting this telling commentary from *Smith's Weekly*: “The banning of the Kelly Gang should teach producers to aspire to higher things than the mere raking up of our *best forgotten history*” (qtd. in Shirley & Adams 70 – my italics).

An unrelated but significant ban was also placed on Franklyn Barrett's *The Breaking of the Drought* (1920). Although not a Western, this film was very much concerned with outback and bush settings and experiences, but it has the dubious distinction of being the first Australian film censored for export because, with its depiction of drought-stricken outback country, it was deemed to depict the nation in an unfavourable light (Shirley 14). Taken together, this ban on representations of harsh outback country, and the suspicion with which governments and public commentators viewed the celebration of the bushranger figure, constitute considerable hurdles to the development of an Australian Western film genre that could freely address complex historical and moral issues.

Bill Routt argues that the ban on bushranging films must be seen as a symptom of a broader cultural conservatism: “The wowsers were running things, and the police bans against bushranger films may be usefully thought of as evidence of their attitude, which surely would have had pretty much the same effect even without official police backing” (Routt “Bush Westerns”). The very idea that some part of a nation's history could be deemed “best forgotten” rather than be processed through the filter of cultural production, testifies not only to the puritanical nature of Australian authority in the early 20th century, but to a certain streak of “willful blindness” that haunts Australia's relationship to its history. As many contemporary residents of Australia could attest, this willful blindness has clear contemporary resonance; witness the discourse that underpinned, for example, the Howard Government's refusal to apologise to Aboriginal Australians for the suffering experienced by the Stolen Generations, or the “History Wars” debates over the treatment of

Aboriginal people during invasion and settlement.

These quite specific structural, economic and thematic blockages against the development of the Western in Australia, are complemented by broader cultural problems evident when we compare the American use of the Western to Australia's use of cinema to reflect on national identity and the landscape. Glen Lewis compares American and Australian notions of heroism – the *need* for a hero being a key element of the Western mythos – noting that the Australian tradition, which he argues is a function of its convict past, celebrates the anti-hero, the outlaw and the underdog rather than the righteous victor. Hence Australian national myths are built around glorious defeats (witness the filmic manifestations of events such as the Eureka Stockade and Gallipoli), not glorious victories (Lewis 15).

Lewis also identifies a difference in attitudes to heroic violence, comparing the American exploration of scenarios in which violence is justified (leading to the ideology Richard Slotkin calls “regeneration through violence” – see Slotkin) to an Australian reticence in justifying violent acts:

Where the classic American movie form, the Western, often involves the hero in a difficult moral choice about the legitimate use of violence (as in *Shane*), Australian movies, lacking a violent frontier history, have mostly focused on the historical abuse of Australian Aboriginals, or have displaced these fears of violence onto fantasy-futuristic worlds or into the fear of domestic violence. If violence is one of the main trademarks of American films, then alienation is the Australian movie counterpart, expressed as either racial, sexual, or social alienation. (Lewis 16)

Lewis' comment that Australia lacks “a violent frontier history” is highly arguable of course, and may itself be a function of the aforementioned “willful blindness” towards Australia's history, but his identification of a fear of violence, a fear of invoking a narrative world where violence must be justified, is sound. Lacking a mature phase, and having only a tiny number of films that fit within a revisionist phase, Westerns in Australia were never implemented as a process to work through the violence in Australia's history, to consciously play off its justification and excoriation, and it is the stasis of alienation, Lewis argues, which stands in for this missing process. Australia's revisionist Westerns, *The Tracker* and *The Proposition*, stand conspicuously alone in their foregrounding, albeit

through quite different modes of representation, of frontier violence, and particularly violence against Aboriginal people (Starrs 169). This is not to suggest that Australia's difficult history is not examined and re-worked in other films and genres – Collins and Davis' *Australian Cinema After Mabo* is due testament to the cultural aftershocks of the 1992 Mabo decision and the ways in which its recognition of native title has prompted Australian filmmakers to re-assess certain traditions in Australian mythography. Rather, it is simply to note that it is only in this contemporary period that the Western is used to do this – during the period of the Classic Hollywood Western, no comparable Australian tradition was developed.

This alienation and practice of displacement extends to the relationship to country as well, another hurdle in the instantiation of a mature Western cinema. This is where Ross Gibson's contribution is of particular significance. Gibson has been one of Australia's most consistent voices in calling attention to Australia's relationship to country and the construction of landscape. He charts a parallel and paradoxical relationship to the Australian landscape, arguing that the land is represented as both alien *and* central to Australian identity – central *in* its very otherness. In his contribution to Scott Murray's edited collection *Australian Cinema*, he argues that "the Australian landscape has not been incorporated into the European symbolic order, except as a motif of the 'extra-cultural,' as a sublime structuring void looming over all Australian culture" (Gibson 45). Australian cinema (and literature) has persistently presented its characters with a landscape in which lurks some nameless threat or unresolvable mystery, as in the tradition generally referred to as "Australian Gothic" (see for example Steele; Turcotte). Where the American early Western is concerned with taming the wilderness and celebrating the coming of civilization, and is populated by characters who find their home in the wilderness by subduing it, Australia's early westerns take the bush and bushranging as their territory but do so not to deplete the bush of its otherness, but rather to maintain it. The bushrangers may indeed find their home in the bush but they *capitalize* on its danger, requiring of it that it maintain its capacity to hide the unknown, to shelter that which refuses to succumb to the law of white settlement.

What emerges here is the sense that the land holds the key to a possible Australian sense of belonging, but that this key is continually withheld. "The feeling is still quite strong that the land at our backs is primitive and is therefore a storehouse of some inexhaustible and ineffable Australianness" (Gibson 51). And so again, that very American sense, in

the Western, of a *right* to the land and a place in it, a Manifest Destiny, is denied to Australian cinema, except when it is highly Americanized, as in the *Mad Max* and *Crocodile Dundee* franchises, or obscured by “bush humour” as in the 1985 TV mini-series version of *Robbery Under Arms*, which stars Sam Neill as an effete wise-cracking Captain Starlight. Unless leavened by humour or irony, Australian cinematic heroes don’t usually get to ride off into the sunset, as if disappearing into a land and space that is entirely *native* to them, a land in which from here on in they will feel at home. In Australian cinema, someone riding off into the sunset – especially into the desert, and especially a whitefella – is probably going to die.

The ending of Rolf de Heer’s *The Tracker* marks a notable and ironic commentary on this trope; at the end of the film, once David Gulpilil’s Tracker character has exacted his justice on the brutal figure of The Fanatic (Gary Sweet), the final shot shows the remaining white character, The Follower (Damon Gameau), in the foreground watching the Tracker disappear “into the sunset.” As Fiona Probyn notes, while the Aboriginal character can be presented as able to disappear into a land in which he finds himself always at home, the film presents no solution to the question of whether the white character can do the same. Probyn argues that this narrative ambiguity can be understood as a reflection on the broader question of settler relations to the land, and the incommensurability between both the settler and Aboriginal relations to the land, and between the settler and the land itself: “An Aboriginal ontological connection to land becomes the very thing that the settler wants to share (whether realisable or not) but cannot have – so instead, we have a *lack* of knowledge to cling to.” This lack of settler knowledge of the land – this unknowability of the land – and the awareness of the very real Aboriginal connection to country, haunts Australian cinema. It resonates through the Westerns that *do* exist, and it stands as the watchword of the Westerns that don’t.

Whither the Australian Western?

In the preceding discussion I have presented a series of factors that can be understood to have contributed to the relative failure to emerge of a full and developed tradition of the Western in Australia. As I stated at the outset, this is a speculative process conducted for its heuristic value – to compare the Australian production of Westerns to that of Hollywood is a David and Goliath comparison, invoking vastly different volumes and

conditions of production, and so in a certain sense Australia's relative lack of the Western is simply a question of economics. But size does not always matter; as mentioned earlier, the 1960s and 70s saw a flowering of Westerns across Europe, coming from nations whose film industries were not much larger than Australia's, and these nations developed their own unique "take" on the Western. My questioning is heuristic, then, in the sense that an exploration of the American use of the Western and comparison to the situation in Australia seeks to open a space for thinking about representations of Australian history and national identity, and the actual or possible role of the Western in this process.

To propose that Australia did *not* develop the Western into a mature form, is necessarily to open speculation as to what might have happened if the Western *was* further developed. How might a mature Western genre represent the conflict between settlers and Aboriginal people during invasion and settlement? Might this influence broader societal understandings of this period of Australian history? How might white Australia understand its relationship to the land after such a development? How might a concept like "the Nation," and concomitant notions of "nation-building," be inflected differently?

It is this set of speculations that *Outback and Beyond* was designed to address – not explicitly, in the sense that *Outback and Beyond* is not a fictional feature film in the Western mode, but rather structurally and performatively, through the live presentation and remix of images. It does this via two strategies. Firstly, it presents images from national and state archives that recall Western themes and settings, and butts them up against each other in a live mix situation so anything can be juxtaposed against anything else. The following images have been taken from a range of films that have been "sampled" to form the core of the filmic material in the project: Franklyn Barrett's *Girl of the Bush* (1921) and *Breaking of the Drought* (1920); the docu-dramas *Back of Beyond* (John Heyer, 1954) and *The Inlanders* (John Kingsford Smith, 1949), and an archival fragment named *A 5000 Mile Tour Through Central Australia* (1930).



Figure 1: Images from the archive

When these images are mixed together live and on-the-fly and sequenced with a live and improvised soundtrack, the project creates a cumulative montage that steadily and insistently poses, for an audience, the question of the Western in Australian cinema history. Narrative fragments appear and disappear as different events and scenarios are depicted, requiring that the audience continually re-orient themselves towards the stories that *seem* to underpin these scenes. No master narrative arises, no single perspective or position triumphs, no actual Western emerges – but its latent possibility is asserted throughout the performance.

In *Horizons West* Kitses notes the iconographic status of images in Westerns, the way they take on mythic and ritual significance as a function of their placement within the narrative and historical world of the Western. “Scenes such as passing on gun lore, bathing or being barbered, playing poker, have a latent ritualistic meaning which can be brought to the surface and inflected” (Kitses 25). This same process is invoked in *Outback and Beyond*, where iconic images are used to invoke meta-filmic “worlds of reference.” By mixing together images which recall the key themes of the Western as outlined earlier by Kitses – images of cattle yards, of droving, of cowboys, of Aboriginal characters engaged both in warfare and cultural activity, of outback communication and transportation, and of the land itself – yet which do not cohere into an actual narrative, a story which might be incorporated into a project of mythography, *Outback and Beyond* interposes a missing historical object, a kind of virtual referent. The project proposes that this object, this

Australian Western, exists not in Australia's narrative film tradition, but in a latent and distributed form in the nation's media archive – and, moreover, that it is to this archive that questions about the Western's capacity to re-examine the representations that lead to notions of national identity, need to be addressed.

The materiality of these archival images, then, is foregrounded, highlighting their function as the material evidence of the constructedness of history and, thus, its capacity for re-examination. Many of the images come from highly degraded filmic and photographic media, and this degradation of the emulsion, these scratches and tears, are used as a kind of visual filter through which the other imagery emerges (see Figure 2). *Outback and Beyond* points to an Australian Western that is informed by the complex processes of historical representation and figuration, and that takes the *power* inherent in these processes as a focus of its enquiry.

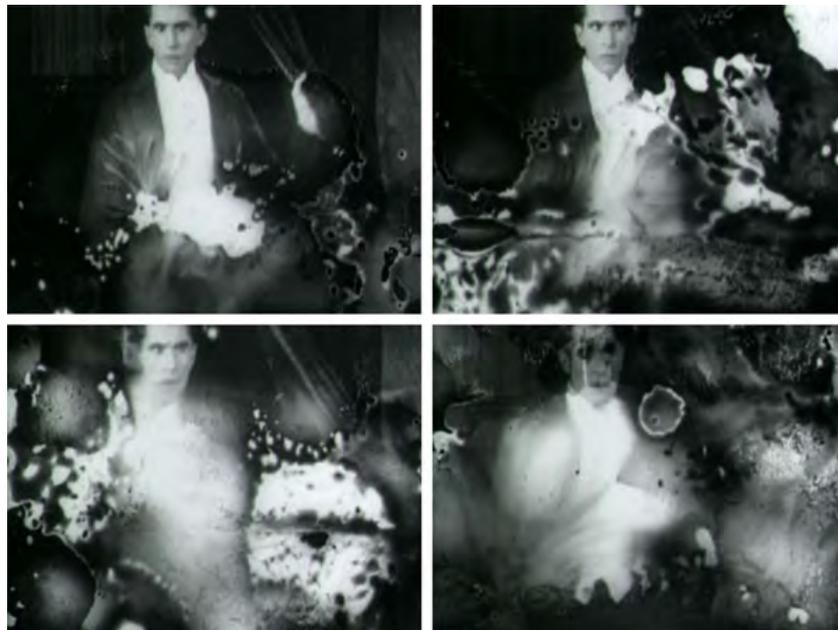


Figure 2: Emulsion degradation in the archive

The second approach taken by *Outback and Beyond* towards the Australian Western is to take a key theme of the Western – nation-building and the installation of technologies of modernity – and develop it more fully, through the invocation of the story of Charles Todd and the Overland Telegraph.



Figure 3: Overland telegraph team (Todd 2nd from right), 1870. Image used courtesy State Library of South Australia, B 69996/15



Figure 4: Planting the first pole, Darwin, 1870. Image used courtesy State Library of South Australia, B 69996/65

The story of Charles Todd is told via both image and text. Images of the Todd expedition from the State Library of South Australia are juxtaposed against the fictional and more recent film footage (see Figures 3 and 4). This juxtaposition produces a kind of tension where actual “documentary” materials – “real” history – abut fictional and dramatized representations, referencing the Western’s capacity to re-contextualize and thus re-examine historical events. Additionally, Mike Cooper sings a libretto which uses fragmentary excerpts – cut-up and remixed in the style of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin – from the book *The Singing Line* by Alice Thomson, Charles Todd’s great-great-granddaughter. The book recounts Todd’s experiences while it also follows Thomson and her partner as they retrace Todd’s route, but Cooper’s use of the text is as a word-source only. Again, following the logic of the remix, no clear narrative is presented, rather a kaleidoscope of images is invoked which

tell a story of struggle in the outback through connotation and worlds of reference (see Figure 5).

TODD WAS READY
 DREAM OF STRINGING
 ADELAIDE TO DARWIN
 400 MEN
 40,000 POLES
 THE CENTRE – TO HOT TO HANDLE
 TELEGRAPH TODD
 TRANS AUSTRALIA TODD
 TRANS AUSTRALIA TELEGRAPH
 KNEW ALMOST NOTHING ABOUT
 CONDITIONS / LOGISTICS / HORSES
 THIRSTY FOR SLOWLY
 BEING THREADED TOGETHER

THE TELEGRAPH
 FAR FLUNG DOMINIONS
 INFORMATION
 AUSTRALIA
 LETTERS MESSAGES BILLS
 BY BOAT
 CEYLON CAPE OF GOOD HOPE
 TRANSPORT
 THE POST
 CUT THE TIME
 THE TELEGRAPH
 TAKE THE RISK
 CONDEMNED TO A SECOND CLASS EXISTENCE
 INDIAN COTTON OPALS AND GOLD
 DIAMOND BROOCHES ON REGENT STREET

Figure 5 – excerpt from the libretto

In this manner, *Outback and Beyond* presents one possible narrative and develops it as representative of the ideology of the Western, it “tries out” this story as a possible manifestation of a national myth: the linking of Australia to the world via telecommunication technologies, bridging the tyranny of distance, cutting a line through open space, ushering in the modern age. Yet of course this narrative as presented cannot simply function as a glorious emblem of nation-building, because it is juxtaposed against images which deconstruct the representations of the Western through the remix process. It is presented rather as a question, a probe or provocation for interrogating the way in which narratives of nation-building and thus notions of national identity emerge from images stored in national archives.

If one of the key purposes of the Western is to seek historical antecedents for the contemporary moment, then *Outback and Beyond* does precisely that, and in that sense addresses the question of what “the Australian Western” might seek to do – to tell stories about the nation’s coming into being. And at the same time, this project also withdraws that possibility; through its remix and deconstruction of the iconography of the Western,

and through the foregrounding of the material form and degradation of these images, it problematizes this notion of the Australian Western, prompting audiences to question their own relation to and complicity in the iconographic function of the images that constitute the performance. In terms Collins and Davis develop in *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, the project operates on a logic of “afterwardness,” involving “historical consciousness or cultural memory of colonial conflict, being reshaped in the present” (100).

In effect, *Outback and Beyond* is an exercise in what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “showing seeing” – a process by which the often invisible or unacknowledged mechanisms and practices of seeing are brought to the fore and examined (Mitchell 176). *Outback and Beyond* uses the genre of the Western to show the seeing of history; it uses the iconography of the Western not only to question the “content” of the imagery that underpins Australian national identity, but to question the process of iconography itself, the writing of the image, its historical and situated coming-into-being. The point of *Outback and Beyond* is both to show certain images – settler/ colonial images that invoke a virtual Australian Western – and simultaneously to show the vicissitudes of the image in general, the possibility of *change* in the image, the image in development, the image as a cultural force, the image in its mutability and in its opening to the future. It seeks to create an “other” Western that inhabits the Western but in order to change it from the inside out.

In *Australian National Cinema*, Tom O’Regan notes that Australia has used its cinema less to promulgate a specific, mythic notion of national identity and character, but rather to try on different identities, and to problematise the possibility and merit of such a thing. He talks about Australian cinema since the 1970s, which has

resolutely set about problematizing its national identity, taking on, or perhaps “trying on” successive identities, holding together apparently incompatible national cultural and political objectives and using the nation as a means of questioning and interrogating its very national possibility and merit as such. (69)

A cinema dedicated to questioning national identity seems like the perfect space for a reflective, nuanced Australian Western genre to develop. The fact that revisionist Westerns like *The Tracker* and *The Proposition* exist is salutary in this regard. More recent developments which use the codes of the Western in combination with other genres, such as Ivan Sen’s police

procedural *Mystery Road* (2013), and David MichTMd's soon-to-be-released sci-fi dystopia *The Rover* (2014), add further nuance to this contemporary use of the Western. In line with these recent cinematic developments, what *Outback and Beyond* seeks to do is open up the capacities of the Western for looking anew at Australia's history, the ways this history is represented, and the conditions under which these representations are identified and collected, the ways these representations bleed into the present. The difficulties of the past are *never* "best forgotten" – they are best remembered, re-examined through the lens of cultural production and, hopefully, reconciled.

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Endnotes

1. "Outback and Beyond" has been performed in Australia and internationally; in 2012 it won a New Face award in the 16th Japan Media Arts Festival, and in 2013 was performed at other international festivals such as the Athens Video Art Festival and the DownUnder Film Festival in Berlin. Further information about the project, plus video documentation, can be viewed on the project website: <http://www.graysoncooke.com/outback>.

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