

The Lost Cult of *Wake in Fright*

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Lost Cults

This essay sets out to account for the “missing” or “lost” (potential) cult text, the feature film *Wake in Fright* (aka *Outback*), made in 1970 as an Australian-American co-production. The film was directed by Canadian Ted Kotcheff and based on a novel of the same name by Australian writer and journalist Kenneth Cook. *United Artists distributed Wake in Fright internationally* and Kotcheff received a Golden Palm nomination at the Cannes Film Festival of 1971, yet the film has virtually been unseen for decades, as the master negative had been deemed lost. Fortuitously, after an exhaustive search, a series of film canisters were found by the film’s editor, Anthony Buckley, in Pittsburgh, inside a shipping container labelled “for destruction”. “It’s one of the great finds of Australian film,” Buckley said and, “I regard it as the most important film made in Australia”¹.

This seemingly apocryphal story mirrors that of the British cult classic *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, 1973, GB), whose negative was dumped in land fill for the M3 motorway near Shepperton studios and the only extant copy (from which the director’s cut was restored) was discovered in the possession of Roger Corman! Unlike *Wake in Fright*, *The Wicker Man* had been in circulation in various truncated formats². To complicate matters (at time of writing) the Australian National Film and Sound Archive has set about restoring the negative, but the ownership rights are being disputed and there appears to be no immediate likelihood of the film being released (on DVD or otherwise) for some time.

So how to analyse a film that does not ‘exist’ in any conventional, contemporary sense? To assess *Wake in Fright’s* status as a cult film at this transitional moment, when there has been such a long hiatus between its initial release and its ‘imminent’ re-release, I will not only test its inclusion against established criteria for legitimising

¹See ‘Wake In Fright: Found in Time – Just’, by Garry Maddox, *The Melbourne Age*, October 16, 2004.
www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/15/1097784044919.html?from=storylhs&oneclick=true

² See *The Wicker Man Enigma*, Blue Underground Films, 2001.

a text as “cult”, but also reflect on audience oriented studies in cult film. I will put forward a textual reading and relate it to other cycles within cult film, notably the ‘hickspolitation’, and equate it with the contemporaneous ‘cult classic’ that it has been compared to, Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971). I will draw upon Kenneth Cook’s “original” source novel to assist in developing the fissures or gaps in my own remembrances of seeing the film at a ‘midnight screening’³ nearly a decade ago.

Wake in Fright tells the story of John Grant, a tenured schoolteacher working off his Education Department bond in the small outback town of Tiboonda. We meet Grant at the beginning of the school holidays on his way to the coastal metropolis of Sydney to spend time with his girlfriend. As it happens Grant is waylaid in the mining town of Bundanyabba (known affectionately to the locals as ‘The Yabba’), where he is drawn into a series of nihilistic vagaries (drunkenness, gambling, hunting, fucking) with the (nearly all-male) community, culminating in an implied rape at the hands of the dipsomaniacal ‘Doc’ Tydon, played with suitable malevolence by Donald Pleasance. The pragmatic recourse to turn to the original source novel, which contains much of the film’s dialogue, plotting and the central ‘transgressive’ set pieces – the two-up school, the kangaroo shoot, Grant’s molestation and subsequent attempted escape/suicide – allows one to expand the scope of “available” analytical material. Brian McFarlane in his study of the translation of Australian novels into films states of *Wake in Fright* that, ‘director Ted Kotcheff and scriptwriter Evan Jones – have captured the tone of Cook’s novel in cinematic terms with remarkable fidelity’ (1983: 23-37). The transgressive content of the film is one the key markers of the cult text⁴ and is important in arguing *Wake in Fright’s* cult credentials.

From the outset I want to make it transparent that in discussing *Wake In Fright* as a cult text I will be performing that particular gesture of the cult critic, namely the re-claiming of a ‘lost’ or obscure text, and anointing it with the significance of cult cachet. It is a (self)-reflexive critical turn, the reasons being twofold: firstly, it is a self-proclaimed sensitivity to the textual/contextual machinations of cult form and progeny, and secondly it positions myself in a distinct relation to *Wake in Fright’s* cult audience, the ramifications of which I will directly explore.

³ Midnight screenings being one of the sites for the reception of cult films and the title of a seminal work in the field. See J.Hoberman and Jonathon Rosenbaum, *Midnight Movies*, New York: Harper, 1983.

⁴ See Barry Keith Grant (2000:19).

The story of the discovery of the negative and its “imminent” re-release has generated some discussion on web message boards from those that saw the film on initial release and those that are expectantly aware of its “cult-ness”. *Wake in Fright* has been described, for example, as the ‘Australian *Straw Dogs*’ situating it within a group of texts with cult ‘notoriety’⁵. The views of these two interacting groups – members of *Wake in Fright*’s select group of knowledgeable fans and those who wish to ‘participate’ in this community - will be incorporated into this reading to add credence to my own claims.

This is an inclusive methodology for dealing with diffi(cult) to find films that incorporates a user-generated, “wiki-criticism”⁶.

Given that the methodology is necessarily complex and multifaceted, due to the virtual absence of an available copy of *Wake in Fright* for analysis and the (non)-existence of a contemporary audience, we require a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes a given film text. Victor Burgin asserts that a film text and, for that matter, the functioning of the cinema is today better understood as a concatenation of information and events or sequences, a heterogeneous ‘object’ constructed by fragments and memories (2004: 8-9). The interpretive strategy I have outlined remains consistent with Burgin’s encapsulation given that I will include a number of information sources – the primary film object, the secondary source novel as well as a conflation of

⁵ Two notable examples that I will be including quotes from are:

Criterion Forum

<http://www.criterionforum.org/forum/viewtopic.php?p=32985&sid=4a8f2e458c50cb24cbc62a8473cd17f6>

Home Theater Forum

<http://www.hometheaterforum.com/htf/archive/index.php/t-216832.html>

This latter thread is of particular interest as it includes those who saw *Wake in Fright* at time of release or on Australian television, the story of the discovery of the negative, a reply from someone at the National Film and Sound Archive involved in the restoration process, another who has tried to interest distribution companies and others who anticipate seeing the film. The accumulated effect of these ‘strands’ is to establish a context for generating ‘cult’ interest.

⁶ While not wanting to engage in a debate about the truth claims or the accuracy/inaccuracy of wikipedia.com as an academic knowledge source I am borrowing its moniker to propose the notion of critical assessment being founded on the accretion of collective testimonies, memories, wish fulfilments, etcetera rather than the traditional role of academic as sole interpreter. Needless to say the proposition only extends to certain facets such as reception and not as a replacement of academic methodology per se.

personal and other 'memories' and the projected desires of those who *want* to construct the film, derived from the internet message boards. This approach not only recognises the heterogeneity of a film, but also enacts this notion as a tool for critical reasoning. The imbrication of novel with film initiates a discourse between 'primary' source texts, and a dialogue between my (and others') remembrances of the film in conjunction with Cook's novel forms a multi-"authorial" reading from multifarious 'incomplete' voices. This interpretive process displaces the conception of a singular, originary text or reader/author and alludes to the hierarchisation and valency of distinct cultural forms.

A Film Without An Audience: Problems of Reception

The "absence" of *Wake In Fright*, both in terms of its unavailability and a lack of critical assessment is an intriguing scenario, particularly in light of the recent shift in cult studies to audience-based research. Although I have seen the film, in terms of analysing it in a post-Bellourian⁷ sense, there is simply no possibility of obtaining a copy, which raises questions about (my) analytical methodology.

The film did receive international distribution at time of production, and ran for several months in Paris and London, but was not widely publicised in Australia and fared poorly (Pike & Cooper, 1998:259). Beyond this it is difficult to ascertain where and when it may have been shown/seen. When I was growing up in Australia *Wake in Fright* was occasionally shown on television and a rough 16mm print was circulated for 'midnight' screenings in the 1990s. Joe from the Home Theater Forum describes his experience of watching the film thus: '*Wake in Fright* is one of the most harrowing films I have ever seen...I saw it on a late Friday night on TV when I was a teenager in Sydney. It is so exhausting that when it ends, it's a wonderful relief...'. The film has never been released on video or DVD and the television rights have since lapsed. Gordon opines that the film has been called "the best Australian film ever made, so it would be great to see if it lives up to the hype"⁸. Comments such as these are indicative of the ways in which a film can trade on its *potential* cult status as both rare ("I saw it", pointing to a select group with esoteric knowledge),

⁷ If we accept the detailed shot-by-shot close textual analyses of films performed by theorist Raymond Bellour in the late 70s and early 80s (collected as *The Analysis of Film*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001 [trans. from the French]) as marking a shift towards *de rigueur* criticism of contemporary film studies.

⁸ Home Theater Forum

<http://www.hometheaterforum.com/htf/archive/index.php/t-216832.html>

exceptional ("one of the most harrowing", "the best ever made") and transgressive ("harrowing", "exhausting", "an Oz *Straw Dogs*").

What these quotes do not address is the more thorny issue of how to analyse the content of the film in any detail. The cinematic analyst of the video/DVD era typically has the luxury of viewing a given film text any number of times to scrutinise, interpret or deconstruct the content and formal properties of the object under consideration. The ability to objectively outline the micro- and macro-textual, hermeneutic and symbolic systems at work in a film may be undertaken in what Bellour deemed 'principled despair'⁹, but is obviously assisted by the availability of the primary source. In this instance one must be utterly disconsolate, because of the absence of a copy of the film. How to resolve this impasse without 'relying', like Joe, on the hazy memory of that late Friday night from youth, or, in my case, that singular midnight screening some decade ago?

Let us first consider some of the generally agreed upon underpinnings of what defines a cult film. In the revised version of his seminal essay on the cult film Barry Keith Grant reiterates how reception (intense devotion on behalf of the audience) is crucial to any conception of the cult film (Grant, 2000:13). While Grant acknowledges that this 'devotion' manifests differently he implies that it is an active engagement, a participatory series of events that is, as he stresses, 'a conjunction between text and the *repeated* (my emphasis) experience of watching that distinguishes the site of the cult movie' (Grant, 2000:15).

To be fair to Grant his presumption is based on typical (contemporary) conditions for reception, which would include theatrical release, repertory screenings, airings on cable and/or free-to-air television, and video and/or DVD publication. In the history of cinema the conflation of these modes of reception are relatively new. When we come to assessing *Wake in Fright* we need to return to the antediluvian times of the 1970s (that is the pre-video/DVD flood) and conceive of reception in an(other) way.

At a certain moment in the distant pre-digital past of last century one way of determining a cult film object was by its virtual absence, that is, it being inaccessible, not-being-seen. Video had provided for a copying format, but the

⁹ This impossibility is known as the 'unattainable text'. See Stam, 1992: 57

potential for distributing obscure genre films was only partially exploited and often compromised by fickle local and/or national censorship laws, and the lack of availability of legitimate dubbed versions. As a result the cult object was often incontrovertibly linked with a cult act; the furtive, sometime criminal gesture of obtaining copies of the rarest, most extreme 'un-cut' cult oddities circulating the globe via clandestine video dubbing networks, collectors and unscrupulous mail order companies.

An aspect of *Wake in Fright's* potential cult status trades on this very "absence", its 'not-having-been-seen'. Jancovich and company remark, if we extend their discussion of the 'video nasty' to the film at hand, that 'it was precisely the status of specific videos as banned items that were *not* readily available that made them precious and desirable objects that were distinguished from 'mainstream' fare (Jancovich & co, 2003:5). While not banned in any official sense, the transgressive and currently 'not readily available' nature of *Wake in Fright* engenders it with these cult attributes. Intriguingly, both for the currency of this paper and the maintaining of these conditions, the 'imminent' release of the film (presumably to a wide market) may undermine this specific notion of cult as 'exclusive', and so we need to understand this discussion as a provisional one at a transitional phase of the film's reception.

Just as Peter Greenaway has quipped that cinema ended with the invention of the remote control, the criteria for categorising a cult films shifts with the concomitant digital format and delivery duopoly of DVD and the web. With directed marketing strategies, multi-channel soundtracks and the appeal of extras often containing critical and interview material with actors, directors and cult commentators the cult film has become like any other marketable niche commodity with its target audiences, dedicated labels (Tartan in the UK, Anchor Bay in America) and fan-based communities.

To a degree the internet and DVD distribution has largely made conceiving of the arcane reception of cult film redundant, or at least threatening 'the sense of distinction and exclusivity on which cult movie fandom depends, blurring the very distinctions that organise it', but this still does not resolve the conundrum we have with *Wake in Fright*. Alternatively, as Jancovich argues, these new media channels

for communication and delivery 'allow fans across the world to communicate and even organise themselves as a collective (Jancovich, 2003:4)'. I have already demonstrated it is fruitful to draw on the comments posted on the message boards to further elucidate this 'process', shedding light on cult oscillating between 'exclusive' and 'inclusive'.

Other Cinemas: the cult urtext

One of the things worth considering with Grant's formulation is whether the 'ideal' conditions for reception that he outlines are biased or limited in any way, for it does assume that one can generalise about the conditions of reception as much as the reception itself. What is overlooked or undertheorised in the haste to formulate generic schema for the cult object is that these conditions may vary widely from one country or context to the next. *Wake in Fright* is instructive in that it was a film produced in a country with (at the time) an almost non-existent national film output (something I will pay particular attention to in the next section) as a co-production that did not receive 'local' Australian video release. Currently, countries that do not have the same extensive exhibition/distribution channels as the United States and the United Kingdom do not necessarily have access to a vast majority of cult titles, where the cost of importing copies is prohibitive. Not surprisingly, the DVD region system dictates what becomes available where, so that one (still) cannot essentialise about conditions of reception and we need to be able to conceive of more flexible models for assessing cult films, in particular due to their marginal appeal¹⁰.

I would like to propose a more nuanced, inclusive rejoinder to Grant's notion of 'devotion' and suggest that it is the *possibility* of the cult text – that which transgresses, shocks, arouses, in ways not consistent with 'mainstream' cinema – that creates the desire for certain 'devotional' modes of reception. The most well known examples (*Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Blues Brothers*) operate in specific contexts that make it possible for their reception to manifest in the *particular* way that Grant outlines, but this is not true (or likely) of all cult texts. This devotion (not unlike the

¹⁰ Multi-region players have, to a degree, limited the exclusivity of the region coding, however, for example, at the recent *Cine-Excess* film conference, Sten Saluveer, the festival organiser for the Haapsalu Horror and Fantasy Film Festival (HOFF) in Estonia told of how there is a virtual monopoly of film exhibition and distribution (including DVD) across the Baltic states, making it extremely difficult for fans/alternative distributors to access many cult (and other) films. *Cine-Excess: An International Conference on Global Cult Film Traditions*, Apollo West End Cinema, London, 3rd – 5th May, 2007

disembodied entities and spectres of religiosity) is to an extent an *a priori* mode, generated by a cult urtext that promises to represent the primitive, the untrammelled and the excesses of ego in cult's "notorious" texts. And it is in this lacuna between conception and reception that the cult (and other) film resides, a liminal act drawing on accumulative knowledge of what the cult film *does* and the realisation that the cult film often contains a surplus of meaning, fissures in logic, coherency, aesthetic and ideological consistency that appeal to the cult fan. As such the cult text will regularly re-situate us, the viewer, in that interval between the desire for the next cult text and our devotion to its reception, that is, seeking a text and a community to whom we want to 'belong'. In this reformulated schema the (possibility of) reception *as* cult film remains crucial, but the devotional exploits of those who participate in repeated screenings is not essential, just one (perhaps a hyper-realised one) of many points of interaction between the cult text and its (potential for) audience/s.

Cult Credentials: Australian Gothic, Hicksploitation, or an Oz *Straw Dogs*?

Looking for tangible registers to locate *Wake in Fright* within existing cult reception definitions, is, as has already been demonstrated, a fraught exercise. The proposition appears clearer when we shift from audience-oriented schema to textual analysis. Having said that, genre conventions, national cycles and/or issues of identity, the context at time of production and contemporary shifts in social mores or methodology initiate a series of bifurcating avenues to pursue. Burgin's 'textual concatenation' needs to encompass the vicissitudes of the academic enterprise, so as to prevent an attenuated interpretation. The existence of a source novel for *Wake in Fright* only partially 'solves' the problem of the lack of a 'copy' of the film, but the method cannot simply be transposed to other diffi(cult) texts, where no such source exists. The process needs to be understood as inclusive *per se* rather than constituted by a fixed criteria.

One key element of the cult text that I have already mentioned, and is continually alluded to in the message boards in relation to *Wake in Fright*, is that of transgression. Barry Keith Grant sees transgression playing a significant role in the understanding of cult (with a limited caveat), linking it to his concept of the 'double feature'. The 'double feature' is where a cult text sets up a challenging social force (polymorphous sexuality, zombies, hicks, renegades, aliens, et al) only to condemn

or destroy them at the film's conclusion. As Grant elucidates, 'cult movies may boast of their transgressive qualities through excesses of style or content, treating normally taboo subjects, or violating commonly accepted standards of taste; but they, too, often end by recuperating that which initially has posed a threat to dominant ideology' (Grant, 2000: 25). As a result of this doubling effect cult films can often transmit contradictory ideological messages, entertaining themes that contravene conventional 'mainstream' representations (being a significant factor in their *appeal*), before asserting what they claim to undermine due to some random act of peripeteia.

Before placing *Wake in Fright* under the microscope to examine whether it recuperates its transgressive elements let us first probe its textual machinations to ascertain what or how it 'transgresses'. *Wake in Fright's* brutally realised content, so antithetical to the burgeoning Australian cinema at the time, was made on the cusp of the period euphemistically known as the 'The Renaissance', something of a misnomer given that there had really only been sporadic, unstructured film production up until this time¹¹. The first period that emerged from the government-led Australian film industry was dominated by ocker (sex) comedies (*The Adventures of Barry MacKenzie*, *Stork*, *Alvin Purple*, *Peterson*, et al). By the end of this first decade of the 1970s, their subject matter had morphed into 'tasteful' costume or period dramas (*My Brilliant Career*, *We of the Never Never*, *Breaker Morant*, *Gallipoli*, and so on)¹².

Epitomising the ocker type was Bazza, the lantern jawed, wide eyed idiot savant from *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (Bruce Beresford, 1972, Aus), who was based on a satirical comic strip that appeared in the zeitgeist magazine *Private Eye*. In the film Bazza travels to the United Kingdom and it is noted for its crude, anarchic humour, obsession with swilling lager, raucous attempts at fornication and Pommy bashing. Bazza exemplifies the much-maligned figure of the ocker: boorish, gauche, uncouth and utterly guileless. These surface traits tend to overwhelm Bazza's less offensive ones. He is also a figure with anti-authoritarian leanings (at least in relation

¹¹ See Rayner (1988), Pike and Cooper (1998) and Dermody and Jacka (1988)

¹² This latter group became known as the AFC genre, a term referring to the government institution, the Australian Film Corporation (AFC), which directed the type of productions it wanted to represent and export 'Australian-ness'. It was coined and discussed by Susan Dermody and Liz Jacka in their two-volume opus, *The Screening of Australia*.

to the English and the Queen as the figurehead of Australia), national pride and extreme loyalty to his mates. Consistent across the ocker cycle is a self-deprecating humour that asks questions of the national character, but undermines this deconstruction with diverting humour realised in flamboyant gestures and flagrant language¹³. In praise of the 'virtues' of the ocker film Sam Rohdie has written:

'It is not a nostalgic rural Australian beauty, but the vulgarity, philistinism and energy of an urban contemporary Australia. These are not the distanced and distancing vignettes of the past, a parade of Australians buttoned up in costume, but vicious, zany comedies of the present (cited in Murray, 1994: 77)'.

Rohdie's point of comparison is the period drama that exists in direct opposition to or as a reaction against the ocker comedies' excessive, broad humour, gender and national stereotyping and infantile and ribald approach to sexuality. The period drama can be identified by an earnestness embodied by the reverent depiction of landscape. Written into the Australian Film Corporation (AFC) remit was the intent for the nation's cinematic output to present an almost travelogue rendering of Australia's unique topography, flora and fauna. The historical setting served the dual purpose of signifying both the difficulties of 'civilising' nature linked to the pioneering, colonial ethos and providing for a contemplative, nee spiritual backdrop¹⁴.

The relating of these two cycles is important for situating *Wake in Fright* at the dawn of the 'renaissance' with its near social-realist depiction of the all male 'ocker' milieu and the obliterating function of landscape. It stands as a pivotal and important inclusion within the Australian tradition as it performs that "typical" feature of the cult film in that it explores taboos or transgresses established modes of expression evident in these dominant practices. It takes the ocker out of the diverting city milieu, exposing (him) to the extremes of the outback, a landscape devoid of humorous distraction. The tenets of the 'Yabba ocker collective, while still fuelled by

¹³ For an expanded discussion of the ocker comedies see Tom O'Regan, 'Cinema oz: the ocker films', in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *The Australian Screen* (Melbourne: Penguin 1989).

¹⁴ No more so than in the evocative, Victorian era Peter Weir horror film, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*.

beer, are conformist not anti-authoritarian, and the diegesis is not a site for spiritual absolution or mythologised as a hardship to be overcome, but is tainted with a pervasive, destructive nihilism (recall Joe's "harrowing" and "exhausting" experience of watching the film coupled with the "wonderful relief when it ends").

Wake in Fright is a searing demystification of the Australian outback, but rather than the landscape more conventionally concealing the psychopath 'within', a veneer of egalitarianism shrouds a rigid, self-destructive complicity played out in various rituals of male-bonding or 'mateship'. As a Yabba taxi-driver pontificates, glossing over the statement's sinister undertones, 'it's a free and easy place. Nobody cares who you are or where you came from; as long as you're a good bloke you're all right' (Cook, 1961:15).

Wake in Fright opens with an excruciating pan across an empty vista devoid of life. In Kenneth Cook's novel the writer sets the locale with repeated descriptions of the insidious nature of the climate and landscape and its evocation of death. Cook writes that, 'the sun had withered every living thing. The people had withered, their skins contracting and their eyes sinking – skull like' (1961:6), '... the shimmering haze, ... the Silent Centre of Australia, the Dead Heart (1961:11)', '... [the] bleak and frightening land. ... the heat that seemed to thrust long, hot fingers through his skull into the living, tender cells of his brain. The sadness [the loneliness] that permeates the outback ... [and] the sun's torturing hold (1961:12). When English director Nicholas Roeg ventured to Australia to make the other great 'foreign' film of the period, *Walkabout*, he was asked what he thought about the place. 'Two stops over-exposed' (Murray, 1994: N.4, 144) was his reply, referring to the intensity of the sun. Cook's novel and the film make explicit use of light as a blinding rather than an illuminating natural feature. It is an "exhausting" film to watch, in part, because the eye must adjust to extremes in the quantity of light exposed.

The fact that *Wake in Fright* precedes the two main strands (Ocker comedies, period drama) of the first decade and is directed by a foreign filmmaker and stars international actors in the leads (Gary Bond as Grant, Donald Pleasance as 'Doc'), makes it logical to entertain cult realms outside of those located within (Australian) national traits. The film can be seen to "fan-out" to interconnect with related texts

and contexts much in the same way that heterogeneous information channels construe Burgin's notion of the discontinuous construction of the film 'object'.

David Hare on the Criterion Forum comments that, 'I was not bothered by the two leads being British as some reviewers were at the time, when there was a lot of debate about what constituted an "Australian" movie', no doubt as a means of disavowing the story being about 'them'. Douglas from the Home Theater Forum writes that 'I saw [*Wake in Fright*] when it first opened in London under the title *Outback*. I thought it a fascinating and unusual film and I have always wondered why it had virtually disappeared'. His 'fascinating' and 'unusual' is far more neutral than Joe's hyperbolic 'harrowing' and 'exhausting' cited earlier, pointing to how we must scrutinise the nuances of the myriad voices that contribute to web discussions, where fan communities can collapse national ones. It would be remiss to assume a homogenous mass despite Jancovich's characterising the possibility of "collective organisation" amongst cult groups. Identifying national and international opinions amongst the film's aggrandisers indicates how these fragments can direct divergent ways of approaching or qualifying an analysis. Concomitant with these intersections is an understanding of transgression as a projection of desire that seeks to cling onto various hooks expressed about the film's *potential* to satisfy cult tastes.

Into the 'fascinating' and 'unusual' Dantean world of the outback is placed the isolated figure of John Grant. As the local school teacher at Tiboonda, a fly blown, dust covered, one-pub town, Grant is immediately marginalised from the other inhabitants, comprised as they are of sheep and cattle farmers, railway workers and the local publican. Grant's Otherness, initiated by a cultural divide, is reinforced by a geographical one as he is identified as a coastal Australian, a native of Sydney, the metropolis clinging to the verdant strip of the continent lying between the cooling swell of the Pacific Ocean and the aptly named Great Dividing Range. The city is configured as a site of vivacity and desire where John yearns to be reunited with his girlfriend (the film is interspersed with this wish fulfillment in a repeated shot of a bikini-clad woman breaking the surf waves), as opposed to the barren desolation of the 'internal' desert.

Wake in Fright trades on this dichotomy and others of plenitude/nothingness, centre/periphery and isolation/freedom. This is a cinema of extreme contrasts and

perspectives: the almost incomprehensible, infinite views across the desert lit by the relentless, blinding sun ('when he opened his eyes the light was unbearable', 'Grant flinched at the block of light', 1961: 64,72), contrasted with stifling, airless interiors of pubs ('it was hard to decide whether it was hotter inside the hotel or out on the street', 1961:17) and vehicles ('their body stench mingled disagreeably', 'the air in the car was foul', 1961: 73,75), where proximity to others is inescapably close.

This conflict between city 'culture' and rural (in this instance outback) philistinism is a familiar trope of one of cult's staple genres, exploitation cinema, in particular the sub-genre of the 'hicksploitation' or white trash film. In one its earliest incarnations, *The Sadist*, an escaped homicidal maniac, Charlie Tibbs, randomly captures and brutally tortures a group of school teachers, their pleas to consider his actions met by his leering dismissal and references to his experiences of being ridiculed by his educators. His simple, inflected speech and all-denim attire mark the amoral Charlie with signs of his white trash progeny.

What distinguishes *Wake in Fright* from similar scenarios in the 'hicksploitation' sub-genre is the utter complicity of Grant's actions. It is this variance of the white trash scenario that makes *Wake in Fright* an important addition to the cult canon and ripe for rediscovery. Whether it be the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *Deliverance* or more recent films such as *House of 1000 Corpses*, in these films the indigenous forces termed hicks, rednecks or inbreds, are malevolent, xenophobic and socially deviant, who attempt to corrupt, torture or kill the outsider, who must then 'learn' the traits of the perpetrators to survive.

Conversely, Grant's experiences in the 'Yabba', a place described by Cook as a 'variation of hell', but by the laconic locals as "the best little place on earth", is a paradoxical one as he willingly assimilates with its social codes. The residents freely offer their bonhomie and community spirit; they are at the core of the structured society, just one step removed from the cultural elite of the coast, who also pride themselves on civic duty and egalitarianism.

In her study of white trash signifiers Annalee Newitz makes a telling point: 'key to this menace is the way whites appear to be primitive versions of their big city counterparts, separated from 'normal' whites by a less civilised demeanour, and not

by the colour of their skin or by a foreign nationality' (1997:134). This couldn't be truer of Grant's position within the Yabba's rigid social structure for the locals are not the barbaric foreign or monstrous 'Other' who disrupt a homogenous community (a staple horror trope from *Dracula* to *Frankenstein*), but an accommodating, welcoming, egalitarian brotherhood. Paradoxically, the deferment or abolition of class difference, a sweaty, beer fuelled variation of utopian, socialist democracy, is sealed in a pact of mutual self-obliteration. There are too the blatant exclusions: the few women depicted are illustrated by the tragic Janette, whose sexual encounter with a drunk Grant on a desolate piece of scrub, devoid of emotional investment, suggests that this is the only form of intimacy open to her. The indigenous presence in the outback is nullified and the multicultural ethnicity that makes up even the small rural communities of Australia is also absent. But this was a film of another time when complexities of the social milieu were rarely embraced. For just as *Wake in Fright* had few contemporary equivalents that critiqued Australian mateship, the other influential 'outsider' film of the period, Nicholas Roeg's *Walkabout*, had few corresponding texts that tackled indigenous perspectives and/or conflict with Anglo-Australians.

Pivotal to an understanding of the group dynamics of the core Yabba collective is the incongruous figure of 'Doc' Tydon. Tydon as the local 'doctor' represents the fall from grace of the man of learning. As a self-confessed dipsomaniac 'Doc' appears to be only interested in self-medication and confides in Grant "it is possible to live in the Yabba without money, provided you conform" (Cook, 1961: 68). The fact that Tydon is willing to enact this false good fellowship to achieve satisfied avarice revolves around alcohol as the key to social lubrication. As Cook wryly observes through the perspective of Grant, it is a "peculiar trait of the western people [that is, the Yabba locals], thought Grant, that you could sleep with their wives, despoil their daughters, sponge on them, defraud them, do anything that would mean at least ostracism in normal society, and they would barely seem to notice it. But refuse to drink with them and you became a mortal enemy" (Cook, 1961: 116). A cold Fosters serves for Bazza MacKenzie as a binding social lubricant, but without the near fatal overtones of Grant's plight.

Grant ends up a 'guest' of Tydon and they wake to another bout of drinking. When Grant enquires as to whether the Doc has any water he responds, "The water in the

Yabba is only for washing” and proffers another dose of amber fluid. The two men are joined by a couple of miners and they drive out into the desert, the vehicle laden with booze and guns. In the first of the film’s two significantly transgressive sequences and its most brutal, the men, stupefied by drinking begin shooting kangaroos, John willingly participating in a frenzied attack on one of the animals as a spotlight swirls, creating a disjointed, nauseating scene. The film ‘notoriously’ incorporated real footage of kangaroo culling, barbarically destroying another myth linked to Australia’s unique fauna. The content mirrors that of another long-UK-banned film, Monte Hellman’s bleak *Cockfighter* (replete with explicit cockfighting scenes) adding credence to *Wake in Fright*’s cult infamy.

Cook’s descriptions of the ‘roo shoot are even more repulsive than what the film ‘dares’ to realise with extended descriptions of dismemberment, trailing entrails and butchery. Not only did Grant attempt to ‘eviscerate one [kangaroo] before it was dead; it flopped about with its entrails spilling’ (1961:93), but the pernicious character of “Doc’ hovers over the whole carnage like a demented satyr, castrating the carcasses and ‘slipping the scrotums into his pocket’.

Doc’s ‘emasculating’ gesture functions as a presage to the denouement of the night of the ‘roo shoot, and constitutes the other transgressive moment in the film. After the shoot the men return to Doc’s and continue drinking. In his paralytic state Grant is raped by ‘Doc’, this last, logical expression of ‘mateship’, echoing Rayner’s statement that ‘the doctor can be seen as the embodiment of societal collapse, since his decline and assimilation into the town’s culture prefigures the teacher’s degeneration’ (1988: 27). Tydon’s molestation of John is ambiguous in its violation of John’s free will. Like the ‘roo shoot the scene is ‘unclear’, shot as if in a drunken haze in snippets of time, over-exposed by flashes of sharp, blinding light. In the midst of the horrendous tryst Tydon is described by Cook as a ‘foul thing’, but adds that ‘so was John Grant’ (1961:95). The scene typifies the contradictory bonds of ‘mateship’: their anomie is hidden within a rigorous social ethic formulated by the relentless tedium of the work, climate and landscape that implies a closeness and logically, a same-sex affection. Yet, the homosexual act is represented with no erotic impulse and its intent is to horrify rather than titillate. It is no wonder that the film was excepted with a lack of enthusiasm by a public wanting to formulate

constructive or heroic versions of resolutely, *conventional* national types – the ocker being both its populist apotheosis and ‘cultural’ nadir.

The ‘roo shoot and the subsequent ‘rape’ scene, along with the startlingly bleak opening shot are those that are forever printed onto my retina, not surprisingly given their disturbing content and formal innovation. Gordon from the Home Theater Forum, who implies that he has seen the film, describes *Wake in Fright* as a ‘waking nightmare’, comparing it to director Kotcheff’s style in *First Blood* - it is intensely physical and relentless’. Once again, unlike the character of John Rambo who is ostracised from the town he arrives in, Grant is welcomed unequivocally (‘No-one who’s broke buys beer in the Yabba mate’, 1961:80). Despite the direct nature of the violence (although Grant’s ‘rape’ is not explicitly depicted, but suggested and “re-lived” through a nauseating hangover), far removed from the portentous horror of Gothic literature, the film’s thematic occupation with the cultured outsider pitting his wits against a hostile environment has led *Wake in Fright* to be marked as a film prefiguring the Australian Gothic.¹⁵

It is the context and ambiguity of the rape of Grant that leads to *Wake in Fright* being compared to one of cult’s most notorious texts, Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs*. Gordon decries that *Wake in Fright* ‘often gets labeled as a ‘horror’ film [and that] it would be like calling *Straw Dogs* a horror film’. A potential fan, Flixxy, from Criterion Forum remarks, ‘I have never seen this film (who has?) but it sounds amazing. Kinda like an Oz *Straw Dogs* (a film I love), but even more claustrophobic and sweaty’. *Straw Dogs* guaranteed its ‘exclusive’ cult status by being banned in the UK under the 1984 Video Recordings Act for two decades. The parallels *and* differences with *Wake in Fright* are intriguing: films made by non-indigenous directors about distinct geographic communities (Canadian to Australian outback, American to English rural) and the learned Other coming up against an ostensibly xenophobic community. In *Straw Dogs* bookish, American mathematician David (Dustin Hoffman) moves to a small Cornish town with his wife Amy, a former local, to escape the rat race and work on his ‘theories’. Unlike Grant and despite having an entree into the ‘foreign

¹⁵ Australian Gothic cinema includes Peter Weir’s *The Cars That Ate Paris* and the *Mad Max* series. See Meaghan Morris, ‘Fate and the Family Sedan,’ *East West Film Journal* 4 (1), 113-134, ‘White Panic or, Mad Max and the Sublime,’ *Senses of Cinema* 1 (18), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/mad_max.html and Rayner, J, ‘The Cult Film, Roger Corman and The Cars That Ate Paris’, in *Unruly Pleasures*, op. cit, 221-233.

world', David is ostracised by the township mob on several occasions at the local pub, the site, as in the Yabba, of social acceptance and cohesion.

Straw Dog's most controversial scene, the rape of Amy at the hands of two of the locals, is intercut with David being taken on a hunting excursion by the perpetrators. In contrast to Grant, who willingly participates in *Wake in Fright's* slaughter, David is marginalised, left alone and isolated in the landscape, while, unbeknownst to him; those he has reluctantly accompanied are violating his wife. Conversely, Grant's defilement by 'Doc' after the 'roo shoot by a 'mate' implies a less obvious victimisation, as Grant grimly realises that he has made himself vulnerable by his own connivance. The incident involving Amy is both ambiguous and clear-cut, which lead to the banning of the film; in a deeply misogynistic turn, she at first appears to gain pleasure from her first attacker, only to be brutally sodomised by a second unwanted predator. Crucially, as in *Wake in Fright*, the group bond of the men transcends any transgressive act.

Late in Cook's novel, contemplating the circumstances that has led to his despairing existence, it dawns on Grant that 'what was so fantastic was that there had been no element of necessity about it all. It was though he had deliberately set about destroying himself' (Cook, 1961:127), as he laments that 'at almost every stage of his personal little tragedy he could remember a point of decision where he could have made it otherwise' (Cook, 1961:128).

Wake in Fright concludes by returning to the site of the scenario's opening in Tiboonda, with Grant's demons sublated within the infinite Dead Heart of the outback, resigned to another hapless year of 'teaching'. Rather than a recuperative denouement, the "double feature" that Barry Keith Grant writes about, which allows cult movie fans the double satisfaction of both rejecting dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them (2000:19), John Grant is reminded of the perpetual loop of (his) existence. Unlike David in *Straw Dogs*, who destroys his enemies to retain his status, Grant's 'return' reminds him that there is no escape from the darker side of self. It is reflected in the brutal, lifeless and uncontrollable landscape and mirrored in the desperate predicament of its inhabitants, clinging to the vestiges of community, civilisation and culture with a slaking thirst only alleviated by the one 'strong principle of progress ingrained for a thousand miles –

the beer is always cold' (Cook, 1961:9). *Wake in Fright* is a cult film par excellence as it does not shy away from suggesting that Grant's plight is one that we are all capable of replicating, the desire to (vicariously) transgress that which is familiar and conventional. This reading of the film, elicited in part from the projected desires of fans and my own re-experiencing of this wish fulfillment, constitutes a re-inscribing of that 'exclusive' residue of the cult text, located between conception and reception, emotion and intellection, desire and experience, a concatenation of fact and memory.

CONCLUSION: CULT CONTINGENCIES

Wake in Fright is certainly all of 'fascinating' and 'unusual', 'harrowing' and 'exhausting', 'sweaty' and 'claustrophobic'. Its cult credentials stand up to the rigours of analysis whether it is as a progenitor of the Australian Gothic, as having traits associated with the 'hicksploitation' cycle, of containing transgressive content or being compared to the 'notorious' *Straw Dogs*. My attempt to "represent" the missing text through a study of fan comments, Cook's novel, my remembrances of the film and situating it within its 'initial' historical context, leaves a number of points of departure for further research. Central to these pursuits is an assessment of the contemporary context in which it may be 're-received'.

To stress the point: another writer taking up the same topic without an interest in the specific question of national identity may choose to pursue a comparative analysis of recent 'hicksploitation' films or remakes of 70s horror classics (*Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, et al) as an alternative and thoroughly legitimate point of enquiry. In a secondary paper I have chosen to focus on recent Australian genre films *Undead*, *Wolf Creek* and *Gone*¹⁶.

In arguing for *Wake in Fright's* inclusion in the cult canon via my remembered fragments of the 'lost' film read alongside the novel I have propagated an inclusive interpretive strategy. This methodology has extended to web forums, where the rediscovery of the film's negative has led to fan ruminations on a number of levels: reflective accounts of those that saw the film at first release or on Australian

¹⁶ See my upcoming article, 'Re-discovering *Wake in Fright* as Progenitor of the Australian Gothic', wherein I compare the film to recent Australian genre films, *Wolf Creek*, *Undead* and *Gone* as a means of inaugurating a context for its 're-reception'. I also give a more extensive analysis of the film in terms of its position within the Australian Gothic canon from the perspective of its initial release, something not necessary to this discussion and its specific emphasis on cult criteria.

television, a recurrent comparison with the cult 'notoriety' of *Straw Dogs*, speculation about the film's 'importance', and an anticipation of its re-release by those who have not seen the film.

The overall effect of these various strands and tactics is one of accretion, to indicate that the cult text, or the possibility of a cult text, is a continually negotiated, contingent set of modes of reception, textual codes, cultural contexts and participatory gestures that both pre-figure and 'confirm' a text's cult status, oscillating between 'inclusive' and 'exclusive' methodologies and audiences. Despite the exceptional circumstances of *Wake in Fright's* current non-availability, and the need to re-address the film after its re-emergence (perhaps charting the slide from an 'exclusive' elite to an 'inclusive' niche market), the possibility of it as a cult text does not diverge from any other. To specify: the machinations of theoretical appraisal remain consistent across the discipline, even if the concatenations particular to a given text remain relative.

As helpful as the posts on web discussions have been to argue for *Wake in Fright's* cult-ness, a handful of interested individuals hardly constitute Barry Keith Grant's 'devotional audience'. What these statements do, refracted back through this paper and disseminated across the web – one must assume that there are many others who 'participate' in web forums without posting their own views – is suggest the possibility of a cult reception.

Wake in Fright has all the potential to be considered a cult classic in years to come, and I concur with Gordon from the Home Theater Forum, in condemning this particular interpretation to the dustbin of time, who proclaims, 'the sooner it is re-released in cinemas and/or on DVD and is reappraised, the better'. In recognising the built in 'expiration date' of this paper, I argue that the currency of its ideas not be 'lost' as, no doubt, future cult texts will be in the interstices of global media.

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