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An Ethics of Following and the No Road Film: Trackers, Followers and Fanatics

by Fiona Probyn

Aboriginal Trackers come to the fore in moments of settler crisis, often articulating a limit to settler occupation and settler understanding of the land: "they can't know what I see", as a song from The Tracker (Rolf de Heer 2002) tells us. This limitation has been explained largely as a challenge to white claims to sovereign possession of the land. Wilson has pointed out that the Tracker (in The Tracker) highlights the white men's "failure to grasp the reality of the country they purport to rule" (2002). Similarly, Simpson and I argue in relation to One Night the Moon's (Perkins: 2001) depiction of Tracker Albert Riley that his "knowledge of the land casts doubt over the settler's rightful ownership of it" (Probyn and Simpson 2002). Collins and Davis open their book Australian Cinema After Mabo by reading the return of the Tracker in The Tracker (2002), Rabbit Proof Fence (Noyce: 2002) and One Night the Moon (2001) as a sign of a crisis in Australian national identity after Mabo where "the landscape is no longer the template of an untroubled national identity grounded in European modernity" (2004: 92). Here I look for evidence of giving ground cinematically to this challenge, primarily by reading de Heer's film The Tracker.

The Tracker is a fascinating figure in Australian cultural history. His (more often than her) capacity to read the country can demonstrate an "ontological relationship to land" that Aileen Moreton-Robinson has recently argued is exclusive to Aboriginal people (2003:31). But his presence also highlights the usefulness of that knowledge (and relationship to land), to the process of colonisation. Not surprisingly then, for some the Tracker is a 'race traitor' (Olive Pink qtd in McGregor 1994, Matt Savage qtd in Wiley 1971), part of an unwitting collusion in colonial expansion (Carter, 1987: 340-341), while for others, he is a triumphant figure of culturally specific knowledge (Baulme and Toussaint 1999). He Tracker: he is quite literally their guide to post-Mabo Australian cinema. Taken together, all these readings suggest that the Tracker is a Dream for filmmakers, explorers, myth makers, writers, politicians, academics alike. He can represent Aboriginal privilege, Aboriginal complicity, oppression, containment. He can represent settler powerlessness, powerfulness, arrogance, ignorance and illegitimacy. It seems that he will take us where we want to go, allow us all sorts of possible readings of Australian culture that are contradictory, eclectic and paradoxical. But there is a problem with this, or to put it more accurately, a limit.

Given that the Tracker represents a kind of epistemological limit to settler perceptions, it seems strange that we critics try to articulate what the Tracker represents without questioning how this contradicts the function of a 'limit': how can I know what he represents if his knowledge signals something that I cannot know? How is this gap, this aporia to be represented? How might it be represented cinematically?

To think this through I mobilise Rolf de Heer's comment that his film The Tracker is a "road movie without roads" (de Heer's Diary). De Heer's description evokes a film lacking the usual signposts and clues (road signs) to its reading, though containing "plenty signs like this" (The Tracker to the Follower) that white viewers may not be able to 'see'. Other Tracker films like Ivan Sen's short film Wind (1999) have no roads, while Rachel Perkins' One Night the Moon (2000) is also largely off-road. Rabbit Proof Fence (Noyce 2002), was described by the cinematographer Chris Doyle as a "road movie on foot". Each of these films features a Tracker, an Aboriginal 'guide' to a country replete with tracks and other signs (Carter: 1988) that might not be seen by most viewers. We have to imagine what we cannot see for ourselves: this is what cultural difference means, it is also the paradoxical status of the limit in a space/time of liminality.

Stephen Muecke's No Road: Bitumen all the way (1997) can also be mobilised to think about the relationship between track, road and settler perceptions. On one level Muecke's book is about the limits of settler perception. Utilising his text, I argue here that The Tracker is a 'No Road film' which articulates the limits of settler perception. White settlers will never know what/who the Tracker really is and what he represents. Instead we follow, relying on his knowledge while not having it ourselves. This has a number of broad implications that I wish to unpack in this essay.

Rolf de Heer out there: making The Tracker

The Tracker was filmed in Arkaroola Wilderness Sanctuary, northern Flinders Ranges, South Australia. Armed with 27 military maps, Rolf de Heer located the area for filming after a day and a half of vehicle trouble on dirt roads, noting in his diary that "at times like this you realise just what a big country this is". De Heer describes the film as a "road movie without roads" and yet, significantly, his adventure 'out there' in the Flinders Ranges and eventually to Arkaroola to find the location for The Tracker is narrated much like a road movie. He is on the road to 'nowhere' to establish a location/ a 'somewhere':

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But half way to Arkaroola, the tyre deflated and 52 kms later, the spare tyre also gives up leaving de Heer and Corn "stuck, on a dirt roadback" to wait for a passing vehicle. Four hours later de Heer makes it to the next town to get the tyre fixed, commenting: "There were no taxis, no cars to hire, no cars to buy even". The journey continues as does the drama of his self-location: "Got to Arkaroola well after dark, pitched the tents, disposed of a snake under one of them, cooked, ate, fought the flies and mosquitoes, tried to sleep. The tents almost blew away." Arkaroola, a space without roads, poses an epistemological problem for film making: "this is a road movie without roads...how do we co-or-
dinate this in such an isolated place? How do I keep track of the man places we keep the film, as we do the film, how do we film the film, in the right order for the film, how do we do them again?" Off the bitumen de Heer experiences the horror and pleasure of the non-place of space as did the first settlers, the explorers, the original 'trail blazing' 'road warriors', whose freedom 'out there' came from a reliance on a western science of mapping (bitumen's primer) and also, most importantly, a reliance on the other science of Aboriginal Trackers and guides. For the settler whose relationship to land is contingent on the permanent marking of land through roads, being without them is a disorienting experience: via nullus, the no road upsets the bituminising logic of location and possession.

The Tracker depicts a journey taken in 1922 'somewhere in Australia' by four men to capture an Aboriginal man (The Fugitive played by Noel Wilton) accused of murdering a white woman. The other characters include (and are named as) The Fanatic (Gary Sweet), The Tracker (David Gulpilil), the Follower (Damon Gameau) and The Veteran (Grant Page). The Fanatic is quickly revealed as a psychopathic colonialist who believes the 'blacks' to be untrustworthy and in need of strict and brutal supervision, a conviction which he also demonstrates in his treatment of the Tracker and in the massacre scene. Along the way he orders the arrest of a small party of 'bush blacks', who are then tortured at gun point until being massacred by him, the Follower and the Veteran. This massacre scene is depicted in one of Peter Coad's 14 paintings (interspersed throughout the film) with a soundtrack of shouting and screaming and guns firing. The Follower then join in an uneasy, strategic alliance based on a common condemnation of the Fanatic. While the Follower sleeps (drugged by the Tracker), the Tracker executes the Fanatic by hanging from a tree, finding him guilty of murder (he has murdered a party of Aborigines and the Veteran). The execution of the Fanatic leaves only the Tracker and Follower. The Tracker then leads the Follower into and out of captivity amongst the 'bush blacks' who have captured the Aboriginal man accused of murdering a white woman. For this crime he is punished according to tribal law, but the Tracker explains to the Follower that as for the other crime of murder of the white woman, he would not get a fair trial for a crime that was probably committed by a white man. The Tracker seems to accept this, or at least follows what The Tracker suggests: 'If you wanna stay alive, you better be quiet and follow me.'

'Sorry', says the Follower to the Tracker

Early on in The Tracker, the Follower disputes the Tracker's ability to read the country. 'That man is now something I can see he's not really tracking, just following his nose and hoping for his best" he says to the Tracker. The Fanatic, a brutal white su-
premacist, is perhaps trying to demonstrate his knowledge of the Tracker's knowledge and orders the Tracker to show the Follower how he reads the land. The Tracker's explanation: "That stone belong there, been kicked away about 2 hours ago" elicits an apology "Sorry", from the Follower. This "Sorry" brings a lingering smile of satisfaction on the Tracker's face. The Follower's 'contrition' (called for elsewhere in song) affords both men grounds for their strategic collabora-
tion later in the film.

Australian audiences will recognise the powerful resonance of this word 'sorry' in reconciliation debates. Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations after the publication of Bringing them Home (1997) was commemorated shamefully in the skies during the Reconciliation Walk over the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000, when SORRY was written many times in the sky above the harbour by a skywriter. The "Sorry" that the Follower delivers in this film comes directly after and through his recognition of the Tracker's knowledge, his ability to read the landscape. This "Sorry" and the recognition of the Tracker's knowledge are bound up with reconciliation itself and recent calls for the recognition of Aboriginal sovereignty.

The relationship between knowledge of the land and 'ownership' of it has been noted by the authors of Reading the Country (Benterrak, Roe and Muecke: 147). While Trackers were often trespassers, their epistemological relationship to land still suggests a sovereign priority in relation to the country at large. Aileen Moreton-Robinson has reaffirmed the significance of land to Aboriginality, arguing that Aboriginality is ontologically linked to the land:

Our ontological relation to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indige-
nous. This ontological relation to land constitutes a subject position that we do not share, and which cannot be shared, with the postcolonial subject whose sense of belonging in this place is tied to migrancy (2003:31).

What Moreton-Robinson seems to be saying (in my interpretation) is that we settlers (or migrants) can have, indeed, should have the knowledge of Aboriginal connectedness to land, but that we cannot have the connectedness it-
self. Moreton-Robinson warns off potential appropriations of Aboriginal belonging (as in Peter Read, see Probyn 2002a), which indicates a level of envy surrounding that connectedness to land. Moreton-Robinson suggests that the posi-
tions of settler migrant and Aboriginal are not incommensurable because of this essential, ontological difference. She explicitly states that the Aboriginal connection to and knowledge of the land cannot be shared: "we do not share" and "cannot be shared". To 'share' this would be to give up the difference that marks her account of Aboriginal power/knowledge. So, there is in Moreton-Robinson's work a desire to close off this aspect of land connectedness to settlers at a metaphysical level and on ontological grounds.

Moreton-Robinson's argument above offers a useful approach to The Tracker and the centrality of the Tracker's knowledge in that film. In the scene that I recounted previously, the Tracker shows the Follower how he has read the coun-
try in which the Follower is responding in a resounding 'sorry' from the Tracker's knowledge and appropriation. This 'sorry' froms to confirm Moreton-Robinson's statement that an Aboriginal ontological relationship to land cannot be shared but that knowledge of that relationship must be recognised by the settler. Interestingly however, the recognition of Aboriginal ontological connectedness does not necessarily lead to a positive or respectful relationship between settler and Aboriginal. After all, the Fanatic also appreciates the Tracker's knowledge but holds him in contempt as a 'black'. This recognition of the knowledge of the tracker (or recognition of the Aboriginal relationship to land) thus presents two options within the film. On the one hand, the Follower's recognition of Aboriginal knowledge of the land seems to throw him off course in terms of his colonialist assumptions and onto more respectful grounds. On the other hand, the Fanatic's knowledge of the Tracker's knowledge situates the Tracker as merely a cog in the colonial machination. The Fanatic's execution suggests that this view of Aboriginal knowledge (as valuable only when it is functionally complicit with colo-
nialism) is not viable, not reconcilable. In a different reading of this scene, Collins and Davis have suggested that the Tracker demonstrates "a willingness to share knowledge, opening the eyes of The Follower and the spectator to his cultural understanding of the land" (16). Here, contrary to Moreton-Robinson's thesis, Collins and Davis suggest that the Tracker's knowledge is "shared" with the Follower. But I would argue that de Heer's film is in agreement with Moreton-Robinson's thesis that there is an incommensurable, ontological land connectedness for Aboriginal Australians that cannot be shared by whites. Again, the film suggests that the knowledge of Aboriginal ontological connectedness can be 'shared', but not the connectedness itself. That is why the Tracker reappears now, at a time when Sovereignty and Native title is most pressing; as a reminder of a connectedness to land that is metaphysically closed off to settlers. However, as Collins and Davis' reading suggests, the desire for that same connection to land is still prevalent within Australian settler culture. Thwarted, it is often expressed as a desire for a connection to Aboriginal knowledge of the land.

This is how it is figured in The Tracker? A close reading of the scene shows that the Tracker and the Follower do not 'share' the Tracker's knowledge. Rather, the Follower recognises that he does not have the knowledge to pass judge-
ment on the Tracker's epistemology. During this scene the camera focuses on the (a dry river bed) in particular on the 'mass' of the stones in front of us. The Tracker shows the Follower and the viewer which stone was turned and when; the evidence and the deduction. We are at ground level, having the signs read to us by the Tracker. This moment of 'reading the signs' is close to a ground for the Tracker to a connection to Aboriginal knowledge of the land.
that can be read very differently. Seeing the film, reading the land in it, we are in no way eliminated: we cannot read the landscape like the Tracker, we are not engaged. We do not share in the knowledge of the Tracker, as Collins and Davis suggest in their reading of the film, rather we are placed in the position of follower who has to trust that he doesn’t know and that his not-knowing is not the same as Aboriginal lies: “anyone can see he’s not really tracking.”

In saying these words the Follower had assumed that he knew that anyone knows what ‘real’ tracking looks like: it is an assumption of god like perspective into the shared knowledge of all Others. Such a presumption has been de-sharpened by Nickoll in the following Aboriginal way: "unspecificality for an Aboriginal indigenous people " (3-4). The Follower’s ‘Sorry’ indicates that he begins to see the limitations of his own perspective on the matter. But it also ends his conversation with the Tracker, as if he now finds the Tracker’s ability ‘unspecifiable’. The Tracker does not leave us in any easy, reconciled, political context at all. It is not the same thing. We do not share in the knowledge of the Tracker, as Collins asks the Tracker if he will be able to find his way home "You know how to get back?" and the Follower says, ‘Think so’ followed by "You?". The Follower still questions the Tracker’s ability to find his way home. The Follower thinks that he will be able to ‘get back’. Do we imagine the Follower nervously rephrasing his steps, following whatever mark of himself that he can see in the land, or ‘following his nose and hoping for the best’? Or do we imagine that the Follower has learnt enough from the Tracker to find his own way, like he belongs, and if so, how might this unguided return trip compromise the Tracker’s epistemological priority insisted on elsewhere in the film? That is to say that with no one to follow : has his contribution and his friendship with the Tracker left him knowing less about the knowledge to survive? (Collins and Davis:172) or is he able to read the country for the first time? It is difficult to read with any certainty and I think this is partly the point of leaving the Follower where he is; stopped, slowed down and lost. It then gives us a unique insight into the Follower’s shoulders as the Tracker gallops away on a horse into the distance. One is going home, the other watches but stays still. We remain attached to the Tracker’s tracks in the distance, as if the way home for the Follower is still linked to this Tracker. This does not surprise us, because the Follower has an ontological connection to land, but not necessarily through their knowledge of the land, but rather through their lack of knowledge and consequently their/our capacity to desire to accommodate the collective. This is one way in which Moreton-Robinson’s ontological view of Aboriginal connection to land might be linked with the white critics (Collins and Davis, Muecke, Read) and their desire (explicit or not) to ‘share’ in that Aboriginal knowledge. 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, and also the promise of someone who does know. Moreton-Robinson’s thesis might be seen in this context as confirming a relationship that has been there from the outset, when the first settlers looked to Aboriginal epistemologies to help navigate the country. At that point they probably did not worry too much about a ‘connectionness’ to it. Now it seems that the settler desire to continually connect to Aboriginal epistemology just at the time when incommensurability comes into play. A settler imperative to follow Aboriginal epistemologies can be thought of as a good thing, as a transformative thing, because it can also de-centre a settler imaginary, producing uncertainty about the direction ahead, with no guarantee of ‘progress’, and with the threat of becoming lost at any moment. Think back to Rolf de Heer, to many other settler texts which articulate this fear of becoming lost ‘out there’ in the ‘badlands’ as Ross Gibson (2002) has recently fantastically rephrased this ‘lostness’ as a positive human involve in accepting the prioritising of Aboriginal knowledge before our own (called for by Rolf de Heer: 2002:xvi). As Stephen Muecke observes, seeing the country differently, with respect to Aboriginal sovereignty might require him/whites to ‘leave the bitumen, to leave the roads and finally to get lost and maybe to find a way again’ (133). This getting lost, reaching the limits, can be rethought as a ‘poetics of failure’ that imagines the limits of settler perception in order to attempt to think otherwise, but not always or necessarily free of colonial paradigms (see Probyn 2002a). It might also be rethought as an ‘ethics of following’ as elucidated in the relationship between the Tracker and the Follower in the film. Such an ethics insists on prioritising Aboriginal knowledge (Moreton-Robinson, 2002: xxv) while not fully knowing what this actually looks like, nor what it might mean. Nor does it come with any clear political trajectory. As Paul Carter reminds us, European colonisers were often initially followers: “More often than not the European explorer did not lead, but was led” (340). Carter points out that one of the implications of this following was that the “guide enables him (the explorer) to pretend the horizon is not there, the landscape already possessed” (341). So, following an Aboriginal lead, prioritising Aboriginal knowledge, has also been a feature of colonial power itself. For instance, in his account of an expedition to the Hawkesbury in 1789, Watkin Tench describes following Colbee and Boladaree in order to know what his guides know about the country, to ‘share’ in their knowledge.

We expected to have derived from them [Colbee and Boladaree] much information relating to the country, as on no doubted that they were acquainted with every part of it between the sea coast and the river Hawkesbury. We hoped also to have witnessed their manner of living in the woods, and the resources they rely upon in their journeys. Nothing, however, of this sort had yet occurred (Tench, 187).

Instead of learning about the land or “their manner of living in the woods” (both of pressing concern to a colony which was suffering the combined depredations of very low rations and no bush skills), the main discovery was not theirs of ‘progress’, and with the threat of becoming lost at any moment. Think back to Rolf de Heer, to many other settler texts which articulate this fear of becoming lost ‘out there’ in the ‘badlands’ as Ross Gibson (2002) has recently fantastically rephrased this ‘lostness’ as a positive human involve in accepting the prioritising of Aboriginal knowledge before our own (called for by Rolf de Heer: 2002:xvi). As Stephen Muecke observes, seeing the country differently, with respect to Aboriginal sovereignty might require him/whites to ‘leave the bitumen, to leave the roads and finally to get lost and maybe to find a way again’ (133). This getting lost, reaching the limits, can be rethought as a ‘poetics of failure’ that imagines the limits of settler perception in order to attempt to think otherwise, but not always or necessarily free of colonial paradigms (see Probyn 2002a). It might also be rethought as an ‘ethics of following’ as elucidated in the relationship between the Tracker and the Follower in the film. Such an ethics insists on prioritising Aboriginal knowledge (Moreton-Robinson, 2002: xxv) while not fully knowing what this actually looks like, nor what it might mean. Nor does it come with any clear political trajectory. As Paul Carter reminds us, European colonisers were often initially followers: “More often than not the European explorer did not lead, but was led” (340). Carter points out that one of the implications of this following was that the "guide enables him [the explorer] to pretend the horizon is not there, the landscape already possessed" (341). So, following an Aboriginal lead, prioritising Aboriginal knowledge, has also been a feature of colonial power itself. For instance, in his account of an expedition to the Hawkesbury in 1789, Watkin Tench describes following Colbee and Boladaree in order to know what his guides know about the country, to ‘share’ in their knowledge. The Tracker draws our attention to this settler reliance on an Aboriginal connectedness to land. It is this relationship to land that Moreton-Robinson argues we are excluded from that then constructs settlers as ontologically linked to a lack of knowledge about the land (and thereby dependent on Aboriginal connectedness to land). Thus the settler, the Follower, is ontologically linked to the Aboriginal ontological relationship to country. Into the space of this difference, this incommensurability, between Aboriginal and white settler, often comes romanticism. This was particularly evident in the critical and popular reception that followed the film, and in particular, David Gulpilil. Rather than thinking through the implications of cultural difference that the film gestures at, critics rushed to fill the gaps with romantic figures of resistant, ‘authentic natives’, suspended in a pre-colonial time. This reading of the film and David Gulpil, relates, I would argue, to its challenge to genre and so in order to end with a discussion of the No Road film status, I take a detour here and discuss the ways in which The Tracker and Gulpil were ‘bitumenised’ in the film’s critical reception.

The Tracker

The ‘bitumenising’ of the Tracker, by which I mean the mobilisation of colonial myths to ‘explain’ him finally, followed the reception of David Gulpil as the Tracker in The Tracker, as well as in Rabbit Proof Fence. David Gulpil’s reported reply to Rolf de Heer (‘Rolf, matey. I’m a Tracker’) provided the opportunity for the Tracker to be tracked down to Gulpil’s particular ‘authentic self’. The man who played the Tracker saying that he really was a Tracker made for an interesting loop of representations and counter-representations which is reflected in the suggestion made by some of the film’s reviewers that David Gulpil’s performance as the Tracker was, in fact, not a performance at all, but an example of being ‘natural’. Needless to say, the same reviewers did not argue that Gary Sweet was a ‘natural psychotic Fanatic of outback Australia. (But this does open up the possibility for a reading of the ‘authentic white’ as psychotic rather than a ‘follower’). The romanticised description of Gulpil as ‘natural’ suggests that he is not granted mimetic privilege like his fellow cast members (he is being ‘real’) because of the significance attached to his Aboriginality (manipulating as tracking skills), which in turn concerns his meaningful presence in it. There is something telling in this desire to make the Tracker ‘real’ or David Gulpil accessible through the screen, and it relates to the contemporary fascination for the figure of the Tracker (with his use of ‘traditional’ skills) tells us about Australian settler history and what we might desire to be ‘real’ in it. It is as if in the absence of roads we are back in ‘nature’, rather than in the "cultivated space" (Carter: 337) of Aboriginal sovereign possession.

David Gulpil as the Tracker seemed to serve as part of a complex for the vision of settler history depicted in the film largely through Peter Coad’s paintings, as demonstrated by the following reviewer’s comments: “Along the way are confronting scenes of violence. But at the heart of every scene is the Tracker” (my emphasis). The “but” here seems to suggest a form of consolation for having to bear witness to these scenes of colonial violence, the ‘but’ suggesting that we cannot have been that bad if the Tracker is, after all, victorious, heroic and subservient. His success palliates the brutality of what we imagine. This seems to correlate with the desire to position David Gulpil as a non-Actor despite his work over the past 30 years. Gulpil’s ‘authenticity’ is what the critics desire, to make him the “Face of the Nation” (Inside Film) because in the image of this ‘traditional Yolgnu man’ settler culture is reassured that its history cannot have been entirely destructive, as Elizabeth Povinelli suggests: “Shimmering off this traditional triage, they [settlers] would catch a glimpse of their own best selves” (27). Povinelli suggests that in fact it is the settler who desires
this 'authentic native' because his/her presence effaces "bad settlement history" (35) which led to the loss of those pre-colonial 'Aboriginal traditions' in the first place.

This emphasis on Gulpilil's actual skills as a Tracker and the assertion that he is not actually acting is connected, I think, to the use of Peter Coad's paintings within the film – it is these paintings which depict the violence that the Fanatic orders on the bodies of Aboriginal people captured, chained and shot along the way. There is the potential that such a use of the paintings in place of the camera's depiction of violence might palliate the brutalities of the colonial encounter (as Edward Said sees 'culture' in relation to imperialism in Culture and Imperialism, 1980) that the use of long shots and off screen gun shots to depict violence can be read as an attempt to "make a shameful period of Aboriginal-European relations somehow more palatable" (1993: 29). But in relation to Coad's paintings in the film, critics have responded to the technique with the suggestion that the paintings make the violence more 'real' (more violent than the violence) does in fact invoke its artifice even more strongly because of the reference to the 'real' outside of the film itself. Rolf de Heer's diary reveals that most of the actors found the massacre scene particularly difficult to deal with while David Gulpilil found it exciting because events like these (according to de Heer) were within his memory's community:

David was the only one among us who was actually excided by the scene, by the nature of the depiction. In Anhthemir in Arnhem there are still people alive who were at the massacres that took place there in the first half of the twentieth century, and for him to be seeing how some of it might have been was for him being in touch with his history. But it is our history too (de Heer's diary: Friday 8/3/2001)
The third implication of taking the bitumen out of the Road film is that western markers of time and space lose epistemological priority. A land without permanent roads marking a progression through space has to be read differently and not according to teleology of historical progress. Without the road, the ‘pastness’ of the historical location of these narratives is difficult to place. For instance, The Tracker opens “In 1922, somewhere in Australia”, and it is the absence of roads that produces this ‘somewhere-ness’, the indefinite place off the side of the road, outside of mapped history with its emphasis on progress, movement. To marginalise the perspective of the road of History is to then emphasise the play of time, where past and present became entangled, inseparable, ghosts of each other.

Judith Wright uses the term ‘haunting’ (Wright qtd in Griffiths 1998) to describe the white settler’s relationships to a violent past. The term is apt because, as Derrida has observed in Spectres of Marx (1994), ghosts, spectres, indeed the 1920s, 1930s in these films (and 1867 in Sen’s Wind ) is not only symptomatic of melancholia (an inability to get over it, move on, make progress) as Collins and Davis argue, it might also indicate the need for a new approach to history that has given up on the myth of progress itself (Brown: 2001); and what more perfect place to situate this account of history than a place without roads? Taking the road out of the road film is like taking out the myth of progress, the illusion that we can ‘move on’ through a clearly defined path through linear time and space, with ‘tides of history’ that wash away the past (Justice Toohey’s pronouncement in the Yorta Yorta Land claim). These films return us to the past but only in the sense that there is no clear road to determine what constitutes the pastness of the past and what then constitutes ‘progress’.

The epistemological challenge posed by taking the bitumen road out of the road film that it presents itself not in the guarantee of political progress, away from a violent past and into a glorious future (sic transit Gloria mundi, so passes the glorious world, spoken by both Fanatic and Tracker) but into a sense of historical unpredictability that the No Road film articulates. From the ambivalence of the Tracker who takes centre stage in the No Road film, we can see that the No Road film is like an ambivalent collection of moving images, the politics of which cannot be settled.

Conclusion

Clearly, the political trajectory of the No Road film is not set in stone but in motion and motion pictures at that: objects that are made and read and circulate in ways that cannot be predetermined. Without a clear historical trajectory ahead, with the ‘road to reconciliation’ contested, the No Road film offers itself as an ambiguous guide. Congruent with reconciliation, the recognition of the Tracker’s knowledge in these films bears an enormous cultural significance, as the Tracker says to the Follower: "you listen to me carefully, you do as I tell you to do, you don’t do anything that I don’t tell you to do. That way you’ll survive". This could stand as reminder of the Settler/Follower’s relationship of debt to Aboriginal sovereignty. But as I hope to have shown, it is not so simple. The call to prioritise Aboriginal knowledge can turn the Aboriginal "owner" into the "guide" – the former lending itself to suggestions of sovereignty, the latter suggesting the passing on and sharing of that knowledge to respectful and grateful whites. When Moreton-Robinson insists on an incommensurable Aboriginal ontological connection to land, she also invokes the kinds of parasitism and dependency that colonisation creates in settlers (becoming ontologically dependent on Aboriginal ontological connection to land), she also invokes the kinds of parasitism and dependency that colonisation creates in settlers (becoming ontologically dependent on Aboriginal ontological connection to land), she also invokes the kinds of parasitism and dependency that colonisation creates in settlers. These films like The Tracker highlight this; thereby also highlighting the appropriation that is colonialism’s other name. The Tracker reminds us that the ‘road to reconciliation’ is paved with tracks that whites cannot see and cannot presume to know in advance. No Road films indicate that whites cannot necessarily see a limit to their understanding, but need to have it continually pointed out to us, somewhere, over there, look, here, there. The No Road film follows this predicament of contemporary settler postcoloniality: seeing and not seeing limits in a space/time of liminality.

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FOOTNOTES


3. Jake Wilson (2003) also observes that his “thoughts and motivations are knowable only in part”.

4. Interestingly, the settler in One Night the Moon (Paul Kelly) also recognises the Tracker’s skills (Kelton Pelli) but it is too late. His suicide may signal contrition but not reconciliation, which demands the presence of both men.

5. The Tracker’s spatial command of the country is supported in anthropological work. Balme and Toussaint, anthropologists researching plans to preserve a Tracker’s hut at Fitzroy Crossing, found an overwhelming sense of the need to preserve the hut given that “it represented Aboriginal tracking skills which were found wanting in Europeans’ (1999:32). Balme and Toussaint were surprised by this response by the locals, given the “mediating role of Aboriginal Trackers in European occupation of the Kimberley” (Balme and Toussaint, 31). They had been expecting (and this seems to be a common settler perception, Baker 1988, Carter 1988, Matt Savage qtd in Wiley 1971, Olive Pink qtd in McGregor 1994), that the Trackers would be seen as race traitors. But what seems to have mattered to the community was the fact of those skills and not the uses to which they were put. This emphasis on the significance of those skills seems also to describe recent presentations of Tracker in readings in issues surrounding Tracker complicity are sidelined in readings that highlight the significance of Aboriginal epistemological privilege over the land and the sovereignty that this suggests.

6. David Gulpilil to Rolf de Heer, qtd in “Tracking David” in Inside Film, 46, August 2002, p.34

7. "Gulpilil, in particular, is so completely in sync with his character, it is almost an insult to call it a “performance” Leigh Paatsch, "Rolf’s on the right track" Herald Sun August 15, 2002.


9. "Rolf de Heer has an unusual way of dealing with the violence that is at the heart of his latest film, The Tracker – he opts not to show it directly. The story encompasses massacre, murder and retribution; the violence is portrayed obliquely using songs and paintings. But it is no less harrowing for the restraint de Heer shows. Philippa Hawker "Haunted By History" The Age July 22, 2002. Pomeranz - “De Heer’s use of Coad’s paintings adds an uncanny power to the film, strangely making the violence more meaningful, more tragic, taking away any notion that’s it’s only a movie.”

REFERENCES


Balme J. and Sandy Toussaint, (1999) "I reckon they should keep that hut": Reflections on Aboriginal tracking in the Kimberley” in Australian Aboriginal Studies, Spring, 26-36.

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