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“Weird Melancholy” and the Modern Television Outback: Rage, Shame, and Violence in *Wake in Fright* and *Mystery Road*

Jessica Gildersleeve

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Marcus Clarke famously described the Australian outback as displaying a “Weird Melancholy” (qtd. in Gelder 116). The strange sights, sounds, and experiences of Australia’s rural locations made them ripe for the development of the European genre of the Gothic in a new location, a mutation which has continued over the past two centuries. But what does it mean for Australia’s Gothic landscapes to be associated with the affective qualities of the melancholy? And more particularly, how and why does this Gothic effect (and affect) appear in the most accessible Gothic media of the twenty-first century, the television series? Two recent Australian television adaptations, *Wake in Fright* (2017, dir. Kriv Stenders) and *Mystery Road* (2018, dir. Rachel Perkins) provoke us to ask the question: how does their pictorial representation of the Australian outback and its inhabitants overtly express rage and its close ties to melancholia, shame and violence? More particularly, I argue that in both series this rage is turned inwards rather than outwards; rage is turned into melancholy and thus to self-destruction – which constructs an allegory for the malaise of our contemporary nation. However, here the two series differ. While *Wake in Fright* posits this as a never-ending narrative, in a true Freudian model of melancholics who fail to resolve or attend to their trauma, *Mystery Road* is more positive in its positioning, allowing the themes of apology and recognition to appear, both necessary for reparation and forward movement.

Steven Bruhm has argued that a psychoanalytic model of trauma has become the “best [way to] understand the contemporary Gothic and why we crave it” (268), because the repressions and repetitions of trauma offer a means of playing out the anxieties of our contemporary nation, its fraught histories, its conceptualisations of identity, and its fears for the future. Indeed, as Bruhm states, it is precisely because of the way in which “the Gothic continually confronts us with real, historical traumas that we in the west have created” that they “also continue to control how we think about ourselves as a nation” (271). Jerrold E. Hogle agrees, noting that “Gothic fiction has always begun with trauma” (72). But it is not only that Gothic narratives are best understood as traumatic narratives; rather, Hogle posits that the Gothic is uniquely situated as a genre for dealing with the trauma of our personal and national histories because it enables us to approach the contradictions and conflicts of traumatic experience:

I find that the best of the post-9/11 uses of Gothic in fiction achieve that purpose for attentive readers by using the conflicted unnaturalness basic to the Gothic itself to help us concurrently grasp and conceal how profoundly conflicted we are about the most immediate and pervasive cultural “woundings” of our western world as it has come to be. (75)

Hogle’s point is critical for its attention to the different ways trauma can be dealt with in texts and by readers, returning in part to Sigmund Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia: where mourning is the ‘healthy’ process of working through or narrativising trauma. However, melancholia coalesces into a denial or repression of the traumatic event, and thus, as Freud suggests, its unresolved status reappears during nightmares and flashbacks, for example (Rall 171). Hogle’s praise for the Gothic, however, lies in its ability to move away from that binary, to “concurrently grasp and conceal” trauma: in other words, to respond simultaneously with mourning and with melancholy.

Hogle adds to this classic perspective of melancholia through careful attention to the way in which rage inflects these affective responses. Under a psychoanalytic model, rage can be seen “as an infantile response to separation and loss” (Kahane 127). The emotional free-rein of rage, Claire Kahane points out, “disempowers us as subjects, making us subject to its regressive vicissitudes” (127; original emphasis). In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler explicates this in more detail, making clear that this disempowerment, this inability to clearly express oneself, is what leads to melancholia. Melancholia, then, can be seen as a loss or repression of the identifiable cause of the original rage: this overwhelming emotion has masked its original target. “Insofar as grief remains unspeakable”, Butler posits, “the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that very rage over loss is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions” (212). The only way to “survive” rage in this mutated form of melancholia is to create what Butler terms “collective institutions for grieving”; these enable

the reassembling of community, the reworking of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations. And insofar as they involve the publicisation and dramatisation of death, they call to be read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed. (212-13)

Butler’s reading thus aligns with Hogle’s, suggesting that it is in our careful attendance to the horrific experience of grief (however difficult) that we could navigate towards something like resolution – not a simplified narrative of working through, to be sure, but a more ethical recognition of the trauma which diverts it from its repressive impossibilities. To further the argument, it is only by transforming melancholic rage into outrage, to respond with an affect that puts shame to work, that rage will become politically effective. So, outrage is “a socialised and mediated form of rage ... directed toward identifiable and bounded others in the external world” (Kahane 127-28). Melancholia and shame might then be seen to be directly opposed to one another: the former a failure of rage, the latter its socially productive incarnation.

The Australian Gothic and its repetition of a “Weird Melancholy” exhibit this affective model. Ken Gelder has emphasised the historical coincidences: since Australia was colonised around the same time as the emergence of the Gothic as a genre (115), it has always been infused with what he terms a “colonial melancholia” (119). In contemporary Gothic narratives, this is presented through the repetition of the trauma of loss and injustice, so that the colonial “history of brutal violence and exploitation” (121) is played out, over and over again, desperate for resolution. Indeed, Gelder goes so far as to claim that this is the primary fuel for the Gothic as it manifests in Australian literature and film, arguing that since it is “built upon its dispossession and killings of Aboriginal people and its foundational systems of punishment and incarceration,

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the colonial scene ... continues to shadow Australian cultural production and helps to keep the Australian Gothic very much alive” (121).

That these two recent television series depict the ways in which rage and outrage appear in a primal ‘colonial scene’ which fixes the Australian Gothic within a political narrative. Both *Wake in Fright* and *Mystery Road* are television adaptations of earlier works. *Wake in Fright* is adapted from Kenneth Cook’s novel of the same name (1961), and its film adaptation (1971, dir. Ted Kotcheff). *Mystery Road* is a continuation of the film narrative of the same name (2013, dir. Ivan Sen), and its sequel, *Goldstone* (2016, dir. Ivan Sen). Both narratives illustrate the shift – where the films were first viewed by a high-culture audience attracted to arthouse cinema and modernist fiction – to the re-makes that are viewed in the domestic space of the television screen and/or other devices. Likewise, the television productions were not seen as single episodes, but also linked to each network’s online on-demand streaming viewers, significantly broadening the audience for both works. In this respect, these series both domesticate and democratise the Gothic. The televised series become situated publicly, recalling the broad scale popularity of the Gothic genre, what Helen Wheatley terms “the most domestic of genres on the most domestic of media” (25). In fact, Deborah Cartmell argues that “adaptation is, indeed, the art form of democracy ... a ‘freeing’ of a text from the confined territory of its author and of its readers” (8; emphasis added). Likewise, André Bazin echoes this notion that the adaptation is a kind of “digest” of the original work, “a literature that has been made more *accessible* through cinematic adaptation” (26; emphasis added). In this way, adaptations serve to ‘democratise’ their concerns, focussing these narratives and their themes as more publically accessible, and thus provoking the potential for a broader cultural discussion.

Wake in Fright

Wake in Fright describes the depraved long weekend of schoolteacher John Grant, who is stuck in the rural town of Bundinyabba (“The Yabba”) after he loses all of his money in an ill-advised game of “Two Up.” Modernising the concerns of the original film, in this adaptation John is further endangered by a debt to local loan sharks, and troubled by his frequent flashbacks to his lost lover. The narrative does display drug- and alcohol-induced rage in its infamous pig-shooting (originally roo-shooting) scene, as well as the cold and threatening rage of the loan shark who suspects she will not be paid, both of which are depicted as a specifically *white* aggression. Overall, its primary depiction of rage is directed inward, rather than outward, and in this way becomes narrowed down to emphasise a more individual, traumatic shame. That is, John’s petulant rage after his girlfriend’s rejection of his marriage proposal manifests in his determination to stolidly drink alone while she swims in the ocean. When she drowns while he is drunk and incapable to rescue her, his inaction becomes the primary source of his shame and exacerbates his self-focused, but repressed rage. The subsequent cycles of drinking (residents of The Yabba only drink beer, and plenty of it) and gambling (as he loses over and over at Two-Up) constitute a repetition of his original trauma over her drowning, and trigger the release of his repressed rage. While accompanying some locals during their drunken pig-shooting expedition, his rage finds an outlet, resulting in the death of his new acquaintance, Doc Tydon. Like John, Doc is the victim of a self-focused rage and shame at the death of his young child and the abdication of his responsibilities as the town’s doctor. Both John and Doc depict the collapse of authority and social order in the “Weird Melancholy” of the outback (Rayner 27), but this “subversion of the stereotype of capable, confident Australian masculinity” (37) and the decay of community and social structure remains static. However, the series does not push forward towards a moral outcome or a suggestion of better actions to inspire the viewer. Even his desperate suicide attempt, what he envisions as the only ‘ethical’ way out of his nightmare, ends in failure and is covered up by the local police. The narrative becomes circular: for John is returned to The Yabba every time he tries to leave, and even in the final scene he is back in Tiboonda, returned to where he started, standing at the front of his classroom. But importantly, this cycle mimics John’s cycle of unresolved shame, suggests an inability to ‘wake’ from this nightmare of repetition, with no acknowledgement of his individual history and his complicity in the traumatic events. Although John has outlived his suicide attempt, this does not validate his survival as a rebirth. Rather, John’s refusal of responsibility and the accompanying complicity of local authorities suggests the inevitability of further self-damaging rage, shame, and violence.

Outback Noir

Both *Wake in Fright* and *Mystery Road* have been described as “outback noir” (Dolgoplov 12), combining characteristics of the Gothic, the Western, and film noir in their depictions of suffering and the realisation (or abdication) of justice. Greg Dolgoplov explains that while traditional “film noir explores the moral trauma of crime on its protagonists, who are often escaping personal suffering or harrowing incidents from their pasts” (12), these examples of Australian (outback) noir are primarily concerned with “ancestral trauma – that of both Indigenous and settler. Outback noir challenges official versions of events that glide over historical massacres and current injustices” (12-13).

Wake in Fright’s focus on John’s personal suffering even as his crimes could become allegories for national trauma, aligns this story with traditional film noir. *Mystery Road* is caught up with a more collectivised form of trauma, and with the ‘colonialism’ of outback noir means this adaptation is more effective in locating self-rage and melancholia as integral to social and cultural dilemmas of contemporary Australia.

Each series takes a different path to the treatment of race relations in Australia within a small and isolated rural context. *Wake in Fright* chooses to ignore this historical context, setting up the cycle of John’s repression of trauma as an individual fate, and he is trapped to repeat it. On the other hand, *Mystery Road*, just like its cinematic precursors (*Mystery Road* and *Goldstone*), deals with race as a specific theme. *Mystery Road’s* nod to the noir and the Western is emphasised by the character of Detective Jay Swan: “a lone gunslinger attempting to uphold law and order” (Ward 111), he swaggers around the small township in his cowboy hat, jeans, and boots, stoically searching for clues to the disappearance of two local teenagers. Since Swan is himself Aboriginal, this transforms the representation of authority and its failures depicted in *Wake in Fright*. While the police in *Wake in Fright* uphold the law only when convenient to their own goals, and further, to undertake criminal activities themselves, in *Mystery Road* the authority figures – Jay himself, and his counterpart, Senior Sergeant Emma James, are prominent in the community and dedicated to the pursuit of justice. It is highly significant that this sense of justice reaches beyond the present situation. Emma’s family, the Ballantynes, have been prominent landowners and farmers in the region for over one hundred years, and have always prided themselves on their benevolence towards the local Indigenous population. However, when Emma discovers that her great-grandfather was responsible for the massacre of several young Aboriginal men at the local waterhole, she is overcome by shame. In her horrified tears we see how the legacy of trauma, ever present for the Aboriginal population, is brought home to Emma herself. As the figurehead for justice in the town, Emma is determined to label the murders accurately as a “crime” which must “be answered.” In this acknowledgement and her subsequent apology to Dot, she finds some release from this ancient shame.

The only Aboriginal characters in *Wake in Fright* are marginal to the narrative – taxi drivers who remain peripheral to the traumas within the small town, and thus remain positioned as innocent bystanders to its depravity. However, *Mystery Road* is careful to avoid such reductionist binaries. Just as Emma discovers the truth about her own family’s violence, Uncle Keith, the current Aboriginal patriarch, is exposed as a sexual predator. In both cases the men, leaders in the past and the present, consider themselves as ‘righteous’ in order to mask their enraged and violent behaviour. The moral issue here is more than a simplistic exposition on race, rather it demonstrates that complexity surrounds those who achieve power. When Dot ultimately ‘inherits’ responsibility for the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission this indicates that *Mystery*

Road concludes with two female figures of authority, both looking out for the welfare of the community as a whole. Likewise, they are involved in seeking the young woman, Shevorne, who becomes the focus of abuse and grief, and her daughter. Although Jay is ultimately responsible for solving the crime at the heart of the series, *Mystery Road* strives to position futurity and responsibility in the hands of its female characters and their shared sense of community.

In conclusion, both television adaptations of classic movies located in Australian outback noir have problematised rage within two vastly different contexts. The adaptations *Wake in Fright* and *Mystery Road* do share similar themes and concerns in their responses to past traumas and how that shapes Gothic representation of the outback in present day Australia. However, it is in their treatment of rage, shame, and violence that they diverge. *Wake in Fright's* failure to convert rage beyond melancholia means that it fails to offer any hope of resolution, only an ongoing cycle of shame and violence. But rage, as a driver for injustice, can evolve into something more positive. In *Mystery Road*, the anger of both individuals and the community as a whole moves beyond good/bad and black/white stereotypes of outrage towards a more productive form of shame. In doing so, rage itself can elicit a new model for a more responsible contemporary Australian Gothic narrative.

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