

*Red Dog: The Pilbara Wanderer*¹

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Abstract: This article seeks to provide an overview and analysis of the 2011 Australian film, *Red Dog* as a popular cultural product from Western Australia. Set in a working class mining community in the 1970s, I argue that it provides a new outback legend in the form of Red Dog. This article stems from a review of *Red Dog* as Film of the Year written for the forthcoming *Directory of World Cinema: Australian and New Zealand* Second Edition from Intellect Books.

Red Dog is an Australian film released in 2011 based on the many stories of a real-life red kelpie dog that lived in northern West Australia in the 1970s. The location of the story in the red Pilbara Desert is integral, as *Red Dog* is presented intrinsically as an Australian legend about loyalty and belonging to a place as well as, in *Red Dog*'s case, a person. The film was a surprise commercial and critical success, taking large profits at the Australian box office and garnering numerous awards. In this article, I shall assess the success of the film, attempting to explain some of the appeal to audiences.

In the film, truck driver Thomas, (Luke Ford), enters a roadhouse in Western Australia as the locals and workers from a nearby mine debate how to euthanize a dog. Seizing on the diversion, publican Jack Collins (Noah Taylor) tells Thomas the story of Red Dog (Koko), who has brought the disparate people of the mining town of Dampier together as a community. In flashback, Red Dog befriends many locals, including the mining company immigrant employees, but stays with no single master – he is a ‘dog for everyone’. This changes when American traveller, John Grant (Josh Lucas), takes a job as the mine’s bus driver. Red Dog develops a strong bond with Grant, who becomes his ‘true master’. Grant begins a romance with sassy secretary Nancy Grey (Rachael Taylor), but after proposing to Nancy, Grant is killed in a road accident. Red Dog is left to pine and wander all over the Pilbara desert and beyond in a search of his absent master. Some time later, he returns to the town where he fights his archenemy, Red Cat. After eating poisoned

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meat left by Red Cat's owners, Red Dog is taken to the roadhouse, where he lies when Thomas arrives. One of the miners proposes that they erect a statue of Red Dog. As they celebrate the idea, Red Dog leaves unnoticed. He is later found lying dead on John Grant's grave. A year later, Thomas returns with a puppy, as the statue of the original Red Dog is unveiled.

The real Red Dog was renowned for his loyalty to his master, and his habit of roaming the desert in the 1970s. In 2001, British author Louis de Bernières (best known for *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*) visited Dampier, heard the story and published a novella based on the legend, also called *Red Dog*. It was from this book that Daniel Taplitz adapted his screenplay. The film's producer, Nelson Woss, bought a red kelpie named Koko from a dog breeder two years before filming began and trained him to star as Red Dog. Australian rising star, Rachael Taylor (*Transformers*, 2007) plays Nancy, and American, Josh Lucas (*Sweet Home Alabama*, 2002) is John Grant. Director, Kriv Stenders, previously worked on little-known, hard-hitting, urban drama *Boxing Day* (2007) and heritage thriller *Lucky Country* (2009) among other titles. Other collaborators were cinematographer, Geoffrey Hall (*Chopper*, 2000, *Dirty Deeds*, 2002) and Baz Luhrmann's long-time editor Jill Bilcock (*Strictly Ballroom*, 1992, *Moulin Rouge!*, 2001). Prolific screen composer Cezary Skubiszewski (*Two Hands*, 1999, *Bran Nue Dae*, 2009, *The Sapphires*, 2012) provided the score. The film won seven IF Awards from nine nominations, and two AACTA Awards (formerly the AFI Awards) including Best Film from eight nominations in 2011.

Red Dog and John Grant in the Pilbara Desert © David Darcy ¹



The film had an estimated \$8.5 million production budget and on release in 2011 made \$21.3 million at the Australian box office (Screen Australia 2012), rendering the film a massive commercial success. It was the highest grossing

domestic film of that year, and sits eighth on Screen Australia's 2012 list of top Australian films at the Australian box office. *Red Dog* is also the first Australian film, not backed by a Hollywood studio, to pass \$20 million gross since *Strictly Ballroom* in 1992. It has since sold millions of copies on DVD, and is the third biggest selling DVD of all time in Australia, behind only *Avatar* (2009) and *Finding Nemo* (2003) (Bodey 2012). What is it that struck a chord with Australian audiences? In this article, I suggest that a number of different factors combined to create this runaway hit, including the setting, the comedic script, nostalgic elements, the love story and the pure 'Australianness' of the story and its characters.

The backdrop for the story is the vast, red Pilbara desert with its immense iron-ore mines and its beaches and turquoise Indian Ocean off the attractive Western Australian coast. The film showcases the natural beauty of the region that serves as a scenic background for the representation of close friendship in rural, working communities. However, the use of the landscape operates as more than just a scenic backdrop. In his seminal essay on the Australian environment on film, Ross Gibson describes landscape as 'a leitmotif and a ubiquitous character' (Gibson, 1992). Often the function of this 'leitmotif' is to highlight issues of the very real threat of isolation, starvation and eventual death in the vast dry landscape, the rural versus urban idyll/nightmare dichotomy and the romance of the outback. In *Red Dog*, the danger of the outback is demonstrated by John Grant's premature and sudden death on the desert road.

The familiar Australian bush-story theme of mateship, loyalty and respect between man and dog; a staple element of Australian working life, is highlighted in *Red Dog*. There is also a distinct element of nostalgia for the 1970s exemplified by the selection of 'Oz Rock' songs on the soundtrack, the type of 'utes' the men drive and the beer they drink in the pub. The theme of belonging is also explored via the only real villains in the film, a cantankerous, dog-hating couple, the Cribbages, who deny the existence of any kind of community in Dampier. In Mr Cribbage's words, "there's just a bunch of dirty miners working, drinking and whoring". This provides an opportunity for the townsfolk to rally in solidarity against the couple in support of Red Dog.

Red Dog has an inter-generational appeal, with animal action for young people (including the cartoon-like scraps between Red Cat and Red Dog), and nostalgic elements for older audiences who lived through the 1970s. Comedy generally has wide and broad appeal; the number one run-away Australian film success of all time, *Crocodile Dundee* (1986), was also a comedy about 'Australianness' set partly in stunning outback locations. The irreverent humour of the 'ocker' working-men is certainly one of *Red Dog*'s attractions, along with the romance and pathos. *Red Dog* can be viewed as a much lighter version of *Wake in Fright* (1971), a cult, outback-set film that both *Red Dog*'s Producer, Nelson Woss, and Director, Kriv Stenders, have referenced as an influence (Barkham 2012). This homage is most recognizable in a gambling scene in the pub. At first glance it evokes the game of 'two-up', that features so ominously in *Wake in Fright*, but is comically revealed to be the men of Dampier betting on how quickly Red can eat a bowl of dog food.

The supporting cast are mostly mining company employees ranging from good old 'ocker Aussie', Peeto (John Batchelor), and depressive Jocko (Rohan Nichol) to Italian immigrant Vanno (Arthur Angel) and Chuposki and Dzambaski (the Eastern European 'ski patrol', played by Radek Jonak and Costa Ronin). It is these characters that provide representations of nationalities that some audiences may see as affectionately comic, and some as shallow stereotypes. A comedic subversion of the tough, masculine working-class Australian stereotype is seen in Peeto, the burly, bearded bloke from Melbourne. This plays out in a scene in which Peeto is exposed as having a penchant for relaxing in his *donga* (a portable housing unit, typically for rural workers), with some knitting while listening to jaunty jazz records. The supporting cast also features prolific character-actor, Noah Taylor, as the town publican and a memorable cameo from Australian national treasure, Bill Hunter as a Quint-from-*Jaws* type, in the last role he filmed before his death in 2011. New Zealand's Keisha Castle-Hughes (*Whale-Rider*, 2002) also makes an appearance in a small role as a veterinary assistant and love-interest for the Italian romantic, Vanno.

Red Dog was released the same year as Steven Spielberg's *War Horse*, a similar tale that centred on an animal's heroic loyalty to its master, but manages to avoid that film's overt sentimentality and earnest tone. *Red Dog* received mostly positive reviews, exemplified by the declaration by a critic from *The Age* of it as an 'instant Aussie classic' (Schembri 2011). However, other critics denounced its lack of Indigenous characters and its sentimentalising of the lucrative, but environmentally destructive, mining industry (Burnside 2011). Defending the film, director Stenders argues that *Red Dog* is not a documentary and is instead intended as a feel-good 'celebration' of the birth of the modern mining boom, upon which Australia's latter-day economic success is based (Barkham 2012). Collins and Davis state a theory that "genre films (this including comedy) function for their generic audience as either mythic or ideological solutions to ongoing unreconciled social conflicts". In this way, they claim the appeal of Australian cinema to audiences can be the tendency for some of the films to "backtrack over the dilemmas of a minor English-speaking nation negotiating a place for itself in global politics" (Collins & Davis, 2004).

Red Dog can be viewed as a popular new outback legend that Australia has welcomed to its canon, along with those of 'Waltzing Matilda', Ned Kelly and the fictitious Crocodile Dundee. It features the universal narrative theme of a dog's loyalty for its master, in the style of Scotland's Greyfriar's Bobby or Japan's Hachikō. It also has a post-colonial theme of 'damn the British' as exemplified in the key motivational speech that Jocko delivers to the community in the pub at the film's conclusion. He denounces the town's namesake, seventeenth century English explorer William Dampier, whose written account of their part of the country amounts to "too many flies". A statue of William Dampier is about to be erected in the town and Jocko exclaims, "Well I say, to hell with all that! Why should we have a statue honouring a poncey, pommie, fly-hating aristocrat? Or for that matter a fat general or, god help us, a stinking politician?" The mythic Australian distrust of authority is also demonstrated here. Jocko instead suggests that they erect a statue to "somebody who lives and breathes this vastness and

desolation. Somebody that has red dust stuck up their nose, and in their eyes and in their ears and *up their arses!*” He goes on to highlight the Australian notion of mateship, delineating it from a British militaristic camaraderie: “mates who are loyal by nature not design”. Jocko concludes by suggesting to unanimous approval that they should be honouring, “somebody that represents the Pilbara in all of us and I say that somebody, dammit, IS A DOG!”

The legacy of the film’s success is already in evidence, as demonstrated by reports that a stage musical of *Red Dog* is in development – aligning *Red Dog* with *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* (1994), another Australian film comedy success that was adapted into a stage musical to great acclaim. The use of the Australian landscape in both of these films is vital to expressing their otherness, in comparison to the cinematic dominance of Hollywood’s representation of American landscapes. They also illustrate a shared experience of the impact of the harsh and vast but beautiful environment in character-formation for all Australians.

Red Dog Credits

Year of Release:	2011
Country of Origin:	Australia
Studio:	Endymion Films, The Woss Group
Director:	Kriv Stenders
Producers:	Julie Ryan, Nelson Woss
Screenwriter:	Daniel Taplitz, based on the novel by Louis de Bernières
Cinematographer:	Geoffrey Hall
Editor:	Jill Bilcock
Production Designer:	Ian Gracie
Duration:	92 minutes
Genre:	Comedy drama
Cast:	Koko, Rachael Taylor, Josh Lucas, Noah Taylor, Luke Ford, Rohan Nichol, John Batchelor, Arthur Angel

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Footnote

1. Red Dog and John Grant in the Pilbara Desert © David Darcy
http://blogafi.org/2011/08/04/the-chance-to-work-on-a-broad-canvas-kriv-stenders-on-directing-red-dog/david-darcy_8688/

Anna Blagrove is a Ph.D. researcher at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom. Her MA Film Studies dissertation was entitled 'Dreamtime to Screen-Time: An Exploration of the Representation of Aborigines in Contemporary Australian Road Movies' and her Ph.D. thesis is an audience study of youth engagement with non-mainstream cinema in the UK. She is also employed as Film Education Officer at Cinema City in Norfolk. (School of Film, TV & Media, University of East Anglia, United Kingdom. Email a.blagrove@uea.ac.uk)