

*The Imagined Desert*¹

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Abstract: The following analysis of the Australian Outback as an imagined space is informed by theories describing a separation from the objective physical world and the mapping of its representative double through language, and draws upon a reading of the function of landscape in three fictions; Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Greg Mclean's 2005 horror film *Wolf Creek* and Ted Kotcheff's 1971 cinematic adaptation of Kenneth Cook's novel *Wake in Fright*². I would like to consider the Outback as a culturally produced text, and compare the function of this landscape as a cultural 'reality' to the function of landscape in literary and cinematic fiction.

The Outback is hardly a place, but a narrative. An imagined realm, it exists against a backdrop of cultural memories and horror stories; ironically it is itself the backdrop to these accounts. In this sense, the Outback is at once a textual space and a text, a site of myth making and the product of myth. Ross Gibson defines landscape as a place where nature and culture combine in history: 'As soon as you experience thoughts, emotions or actions in a tract of land, you find you're in a landscape'³. Edward W. Said uses the term 'imaginative geography' to describe spaces and landscapes that have been in some way contrived; he writes of 'the invention and construction of a geographical space called the Orient, for instance, with scant attention paid to the actuality of the geography and its inhabitants'⁴. The subjective meanings of place and space are supplied through the narrative power of collective imagination, cultural perception and history, often even when there is ample evidence to the contrary. Whether culturally or historically constructed, landscapes exist to supply systems of order and meaning about the world, so that in place of the unknown comes a structure of knowledge, a land schema that is 'a mental construct as much as a physical reality'⁵. From this construction rises a

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² Conrad, Joseph, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Paul B Armstrong, A Norton Critical Edition, 4th edn. (New York: Norton and Company, Inc. 2006); *Wolf Creek*. Dir. Greg Mclean. Roadshow Films. 2005; *Wake in Fright*. Dir. Ted Kotcheff. United Artists. 1971

³ Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002) p. 2

⁴ Edward W. Said, 'Invention, Memory, and Place', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter, 2000) p. 181

⁵ Richard Baker, 'Land is Life: A Cultural Geography of Australian Contact History' in *Australian Cultural Geographies*, ed. by Elaine Stratford (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 32-33

distinction between spaces of order and spaces of chaos, and by extension the people that dwell in these respective spaces. Landscape is not the land, it is an impression of the land, and what is impressed on to it; it refers to the mapping of space through language and ideas. For a space to be mapped in this manner, according to Paul Carter, is for it to undergo a transformation:

The *cultural* place where spatial history begins: not in a particular year, but *in the act of naming*. For by the act of place-naming, space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history.⁶

In the Nineteenth Century, the vast space of Central Australia was given significance and cast in Australia's colonial narrative as the 'Outback'. In total disregard to the presence of what is now recognised as the world's most ancient continuing culture, the creation of the 'Outback' and its immanent myth of emptiness became central to European constructions of the Central Australian landscape⁷.

Even before Europeans had confirmed the existence of a southern continent, it had already been created, envisioned as a 'grotesque space, a land peopled by monsters'⁸. For Britain, a symbol of civilisation and expansion, *terra australis* was not only a distant land, but a moral and spiritual antithesis. As the British Empire began to include Australia's eastern shores and elsewhere along the coast, 'Outback' was invented as the opposite space to settled areas:

First recorded in print in 1869, the term "outback" referred to the country west of Wagga Wagga. Previously anything beyond the settlements was classed as "back" country, so "outback" probably started as slang, short for "out in the back country" but it became a sacred word.⁹

Outback represents a space away from settlement, a wilderness. Its own terminology, the 'back', a space 'outside', defines it as 'other'. An 'intrinsically colonial' term, it is a measurement of space in terms of European appropriation¹⁰. European settlers constructed the Australian desert landscape as a space outside of development and outside of history. Its conception as an unchanging wilderness is a European fabrication, the notion of wilderness intimating a land unchanged by a human population and thus 'failing to recognise Aboriginal occupation and land-use'¹¹. European settlers imagined an empty space, a rich and virgin territory, a prize for the conquerors, awaiting development and industrialisation. Conveniently, this 'accorded with and embellished

⁶ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1987) p. xxiv

⁷ Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 6

⁸ Gerry Turcotte, 'Australian Gothic' in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, ed. by Marie Mulvey Roberts (London: Macmillan, 1998) p. 10

⁹ Ann McGrath, 'Travels to a Distant Past: The Mythology of the Outback', *Australian Cultural History* No. 10, (1991), p. 117

¹⁰ McGrath, 1991, 114

¹¹ McGrath, 1991, 118

the British political myth of *terra nullius*: before 1788 Australia had been not only a land of no people but a place where nothing of significance had happened'¹².

For most of the Nineteenth Century, maps of continental Australia portrayed a 'hideous blank'¹³. A desire to map this 'blank' space and fill it with the comforting sight of European names was paramount in colonial society. Before explorers penetrated into the continent's interior the Central Australian space was imagined as a fertile heartland awaiting conquest, sustained by an inland sea. An early and ill-informed published map of Australia exemplified this want, depicting an arterial river running conveniently from the continent's south-east to north-west¹⁴. However, to the disappointment of white Australians:

In the 19th century, Australia's Outback was the backdrop to heroic exploration and bitter pastoral disappointment. ... [Deserts were] defined as the places where there was no prospect of an agricultural economy. They were also the places where brave explorers regularly died.¹⁵

Unable to be assimilated into the growing industry and pastoralism of settlement the Outback remained a site of 'other', defined in opposition to the stability and comfort of the colonies. The only redeeming feature of the Outback was its convenience as a national foe; 'myths of national heroism demand an enemy and the land was readily sacrificed to that end'¹⁶. The more horrible the circumstances surrounding the demise of white explorers in the 'Dead Heart', the greater the honour accorded them, and by extension to the entire colonial population¹⁷. Fear of a silent interior produced a greater satisfaction with the terrain that had been settled; Gibson writes that a 'badland' can 'appear encouraging to the extent that it shows that savagery can be encysted even if it cannot be eliminated'¹⁸. As desolate as the Outback was imagined to be, areas of settlement were antithetical in every conceivable sense; civilised, comfortable, places of which to be proud.

The Outback is still positioned in the contemporary cultural imaginary as being the 'other' place, in opposition to the heavily developed coast, and pastoral areas. Despite this the 'Centre is now the most exported image of Australia'¹⁹. Paradoxically it is viewed as an iconic national landscape as well as a space of the 'other', both a 'rural heartland and wilderness'²⁰. This comparatively recent exportation of images of the 'Red Centre' embraces the Outback's 'otherness', offering a site of unchanged ancient

¹² Haynes, 1998, 5

¹³ Haynes, 1998, 36

¹⁴ Haynes, 1998, 38

¹⁵ Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2007) pp. 100-101

¹⁶ Haynes, 1998, 33

¹⁷ Haynes, 1998, 33

¹⁸ Gibson, 2002, 15

¹⁹ Haynes, 1998, 3

²⁰ Nicholas Gill, 'Life and Death in Australian "Heartlands": pastoralism, ecology and rethinking the Outback', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 21, (2005), p. 39

beauty. H.H. Finlayson, a zoologist, was the first to enthusiastically describe in print the colours of the interior, suggesting that 'it might well be known as a Red Centre'²¹. Opposing the popular view of the desert as flat and unending with detailed accounts of his travels through a vibrant space, Finlayson posited the Central Australian desert as radiant and memorable. His view of the inland was reinforced by Ernestine Hill, a travelling journalist writing in 1937; 'I found that the supposed "dead heart of Australia" was vitally alive'²².

If the 'Dead Heart' is a colonial vision, then 'Red Centre' certainly functions as a nationalist construction, the Outback space as iconic. 'Red Centre' is a term utilised by Tourism Australia in campaigns seeking to market the Northern Territory²³. The wilderness ideal is consumed, rather than the wilderness itself; the Outback landscape's otherness is embodied in marketable and packaged tourist ideals of remoteness and emptiness:

In an age of sensitivity to over-population and urban over-crowding, the immensity of space that so terrified British colonists has become an enviable asset. Silence, immensity, and ancientness, the characteristics of the desert, are now eminently marketable.²⁴

'Red Centre' suggests a welcoming heart of the nation, the place of cultural significance, the site of the 'real' Australia. However, its status as 'other' remains, regardless of marketing intent. Over the last several decades the Outback has received attention as the site of isolated and infrequent horror stories. These narratives feature societal outsiders attacking passive agents seeking to consume the space, in the case of Bradley John Murdoch attacking British tourists Peter Falconio and Joanne Lees in 2001, or in the case of Azaria Chamberlain's death in 1980, describe attacks from the landscape's fauna. Such horror stories, while rare are ubiquitous; they are part of the fabric of the myth that is intrinsic to the Outback. Travellers in the 'Dead Heart' are likely to come under attack, from the landscape, from its creatures, from the 'other'. When travellers go missing, or tourists are shot at, old narratives receive offerings of fresh blood. These violent happenings are in keeping with the Outback narrative's tradition and reinforce its imagined reality. The inversion of the triumphant colonial narrative is one of invasion, genocide and dispossession; the Outback has always been a space of violence. Maria Tumarkin refers to 'traumascapes' as being 'a distinctive category of place, transformed physically and psychically by suffering, part of a scar tissue that now stretches across the world'²⁵. The troubled past of a landscape affects its conception today, manifesting not just in how an environment is treated physically but also in how it functions in our minds. Landscapes with a history of violence are construed as being intertwined with such destructive forces, even when that is not necessarily the case. As will be observed in the latter half of this discussion, both *Wolf*

²¹ H.H. Finlayson, *The Red Centre: Man and Beast in the Heart of Australia* (Sydney: Halstead Printing Company Ltd., 1935) p. 22

²² Ernestine Hill, *Australian Frontier* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1942) p. 237

²³ 'Red Centre, Northern Territory', *Tourism Australia*, <www.australia.com> [Accessed 4 October 2010]

²⁴ Haynes, 1998, 6

²⁵ Maria Tumarkin, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press: 2005) p. 13

Creek and Wake in Fright explore the construction of the Outback as a fearful and dangerous space.

In the context of colonial Australia, the conceptual Outback clearly demarcated areas of settlement from the untamed desert and scrub. Landscape demarcation confers significance, structure. Ultimately, the formation of a significant and familiar landscape from a nameless and unknown space designates the placement of a representation, a simulacrum. Landscape is its own map of reality. Ironically to map landscape is to represent a representation. In dealing with a representation that is predominantly taken to be reality itself, social philosopher and behavioural scientist Alfred Korzybski observes the following:

A map *is not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory... If we reflect upon our languages, we find that at best they must be considered *only as maps*. A word *is not* the object it represents...²⁶

Korzybski identifies language as the means through which we map the surrounding world and knowledge in its entirety. No matter which sensory organ registers a perception, it is language that relates the experience or provides a mode through which to consciously draw conclusions from an incident. Korzybski advises that language is an abstraction contrived to make sense of abstractions, that is, our experiences in the world. These experiences are always mediated through human faculties of awareness; they are only ever the experiences of experiences, never an objective reality; “objective levels are not words”²⁷. Language as a map serves a function, but ultimately can only ever provide representations, impressions, understandings, abstractions. Landscape is a creation devised to impose meaning on an inherently meaningless environment. Landscape ceases to exist outside the mind.

In ‘Simulacra and Simulations’ Jean Baudrillard cites the Borges’ short story ‘On Exactitude in Science’ as an ‘allegory of simulation’ except that for Baudrillard it is the territory that has perished, the map that has survived, even proliferated²⁸. Baudrillard inverts the Borges fable, referring instead to a ‘desert of the real’. If it is the map that has survived then it is the map that we engage with, never the territory. Hyperreality, ‘a generation by models of a real without origin or reality’ is the fabric of existence that we interact with²⁹. To speak of landscape is to speak of the hyperreal reading of space, as though it were text. Interpreting landscape or making reference to space and place are processes tied up in systems of signification. For Roland Barthes, in the process of signification, signs are enmeshed simultaneously in the processes of denotation and connotation³⁰. Denotation ‘describes the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the sign, and of the sign with its referent in external reality’; it is the

²⁶ Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, 4th edn., (Clinton: The Colonial Press Inc, 1958) p. 58

²⁷ Korzybski, 1958, 754

²⁸ Jean Baudrillard, ‘Simulacra and Simulations’ in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Phillip Beitchman (Cambridge: Polity: 1988) p. 166

²⁹ Baudrillard, 1988, 166

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Farrar, Straus and Girouz, Inc. (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1975) pp. 3-16

direct reference of the signifier to the signified³¹. Connotation refers to any association likely to be made with the signifier; largely influenced by cultural bias, connotations are 'meanings which are neither in the dictionary nor in the grammar of the language in which a text is written'³². Connotation is closely linked with the concept of myth, in the sense of the word as used by Barthes³³. For Barthes, a myth is a concatenation of related ideas:

...A story by which a culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature... a culture's way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualising or understanding it.³⁴

Connotation refers to a body of ideas connected to or implied by the signifier; myth refers to the ideas attached to the signified. As a semiotic construction, landscape carries both denotation and connotation.

Said writes that spaces can never be 'coterminous with some stable reality out there that identifies and gives them permanence' because space and landscape stimulate 'not only memory but dreams and fantasies'³⁵. Baudrillard argues that it is impossible to sever denotation from connotation:

We can return to the process of denotation in order to show that it differs in no way from connotation: the denoted [signifier], this objective "reality", is itself nothing more than a coded form... In other words, ideology is as rife with the denotative as with the connotative process and, in sum, denotation is never really anything more than the most attractive and subtle of connotations.³⁶

While the name of a place might denote a specific locality, its significance is forever enmeshed within the weight of connotation. A denoted landscape is inseparable from its connoted meanings.

The signifier 'Outback' denotes the actual physical space of land that takes up much of the Australian Interior; in the same instant, the Outback is never simply a physical environment. 'Outback' connotes a colonial history and a subsequent demarcation of terrain; implicit in this is the separation between the familiar and the other. The Outback connotes constructions as simultaneously a 'Dead Heart' and a 'Red Centre'; both labels denote a single space, but are unrelated in their connotations. These are versions of a fabrication; like any landscape the Outback is an invention, a map that has supplanted reality. The Outback is a canvas for myth, a space mapped through cultural

³¹ John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Routledge: 1990) p. 85

³² Barthes, 1975, 8

³³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) pp. 109-159

³⁴ Fiske, 1990, 88

³⁵ Said, 2000, 81

³⁶ Jean Baudrillard, 'For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign', in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, trans. by Charles Levin, p.89

perception. The Outback setting offers a selection of fictions as models or maps of space, in the same manner that fiction presents an account of reality; reality itself is mapped using the same linguistic and semiotic markers as a text.

Landscape as a semiotic construction is paramount in *Heart of Darkness*, the title of which insinuates an Imperial cultural construction of the African continent as a barbaric location, as well as the metaphysical journey experienced by both Kurtz and Marlow³⁷. The term 'Heart of Darkness' both denotes and implies, but the landscape that it denotes is not the actual physical space of the Congo Interior, but a racist conception. Conrad depicts the jungle as a setting designed to tie in with his novella's key themes. Similarly, directors Mclean and Kotcheff utilise the setting of the Australian Outback in an unambiguous context, as the ideal setting for their respective films. The Outback is represented unequivocally as dry, barren, inhospitable. In *Wolf Creek* it is an abstract space where one encounters decaying symbols of a failed attempt to civilise the land, a land that is utterly devoid of signs of indigenous culture. In *Wake in Fright* the Outback is a vast and open space that causes an overpowering sensation of isolation, threatening to drive the individual within it mad.

Conrad's vision of the Congo Interior serves an important narrative function as the ideal setting for a tale of human madness. Conrad's jungle is reminiscent of Gothic generic tropes, presenting a space that isolates through immensity rather than enclosure; in the Gothic tradition, empty space is 'always threatening'³⁸. The 'arbitrary terrors of the Gothic' are given form in Conrad's narrative through the obliteration of the visual landscape by a smothering fog, and its reduction to abstraction through Marlow's narration³⁹. These qualities are easily applicable to historic constructions of the Outback landscape as a 'hideous blank' or a 'Dead Heart'; Haynes notes that 'through [the] loss of its specific geographical identity [the desert landscape] takes on a wider significance as the epitome of absence, of the metaphysical void'⁴⁰. In *Heart of Darkness* this isolating landscape produces Kurtz, and threatens to overwhelm Marlow. These two characters typify certain archetypal roles in narratives of space; those that are comfortable living in spaces of chaos, wilderness, outside of civilisation; and those who come from spaces of order and travel into the untamed space.

Heart of Darkness is concerned with a hierarchy of places. Marlow makes reference very early in the narrative to 'the dark places of the Earth'⁴¹. London, in being settled and subsequently named, ceases to be a dark place of the Earth. In opposition to this hub of civilisation, and in opposition to Europe at large, there is Africa. Conrad portrays Africa as a space populated and dominated by 'the other'⁴². Conrad's is an Imperial vision of Africa; a savage antithesis to Europe and 'therefore of civilisation'⁴³.

³⁷ Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983) p. 20

³⁸ George E. Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989) p. 20

³⁹ Haynes, 1998, 184

⁴⁰ Haynes, 1998, 185

⁴¹ Conrad, 2006, p. 5

⁴² Chinua Achebe, 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*' in *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Paul A. Armstrong, A Norton Critical Edition, 4th ed, p. 338

⁴³ Achebe, 2006, 338

Marlow's initial experience of Africa is as a boy, pointing at a map; this signals the nature of Conrad's setting as imaginary, a construction; Africa is a 'blank [space] on the Earth'⁴⁴. Marlow tells us that travelling up the Congo River was like 'travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world'⁴⁵. Conrad's vision of the jungle landscape is abstracted, a nightmarish milieu, doubly distorted through the framed narrative of Marlow as speaker rather than narrator. *Heart of Darkness* perfectly illustrates our concerns with landscape as a subjective creation. The Congo setting is very far from reality, it is a European construction of space belonging to the 'other'.

Evoking comparisons to Conrad's distinction between the 'dark places of the Earth' and the 'civilised' opposites, *Wolf Creek* and *Wake in Fright* present the Outback as a veritable 'Dead Heart' in total opposition to Broome and Sydney, respectively. Both films depict a vast and empty expanse of sand and rock, a space that isolates and imprisons. In this version of the Outback there is no water, and the desert is replete with madmen. Like Conrad's jungle, it is an inhospitable and dangerous space that attracts the insane, or breaks people, and gives them cause to find the worst in themselves. Both films introduce characters similar to Kurtz and Marlow; these characters either inhabit the landscape and embody its threat, or are displaced and trying to find their way back to spaces of order.

In its opening sequences *Wolf Creek* establishes a dichotomy of space. Over the course of the film two landscape images are predominant, the beach and the desert. These two separate landscapes become emblematic of a binary that is well established in the national imaginary; 'the coast as civilised and populated versus the Outback as uncivilised, indeed lawless and empty'⁴⁶. According to Stratton, for Australians water connotes civilisation. Within the first several minutes of *Wolf Creek* we see Kristy and Liz, two British backpackers, frolicking by the beach near Broome; shortly afterwards the two are joined by Ben, a young man from Sydney, and the three attend a poolside party. The following morning Liz takes a dawn swim; even though the ocean seems foreboding in this scene, she is safe and returns from her dip unharmed. The water in *Wolf Creek* is harmless, devoid of real-world threats such as sharks or riptides, because it is coupled with the city landscape. Certainly cities can be dangerous places also, but in this hierarchy landscapes of civilisation are familiar, secure. It is when the water starts to dry up, as the trio travel inland, that danger lurks. Besides ominous and sporadic rains, the desert of *Wolf Creek* is completely dry, suggesting real danger. Stratton observes that in 'Australian mythography the drier the Outback, the more lawless and threatening it is'⁴⁷.

The Outback of *Wolf Creek* is flat and featureless. It is devoid of any signs of development beyond bullet riddled road signs and rusting iron sheds. It represents the ultimate conception of the Outback landscape as lawless and inhospitable, ever resistant to any attempts to appropriate its space. The desert found in *Wolf Creek* seems to

⁴⁴ Conrad, 2006, 8

⁴⁵ Conrad, 2006, 33

⁴⁶ Jon Stratton, 'Dying to Come to Australia: Asylum Seekers, Tourists and Death' in *Imagined Australia: Receptions Around the Reciprocal Construction of Identity Between Australia and Europe*, ed. by Renata Summo-O'Connell (Bern: International Academic Publishers, 2009) p. 80

⁴⁷ Stratton, 2009, 80

possess an eerie power to erode the structures of humans, to break down vehicles and stop watches. For the three urbanite backpackers, it is an unknown and threatening space; before the arrival of Mick Taylor, the film's antagonist, the danger comes from the silence and isolation of the landscape. Without vehicles or technology, the backpackers are helpless against an overwhelming landscape; they are directionless, until seemingly help is offered. That same helping hand leads them further into a space of danger. As Taylor tows the three backpackers' car we see both vehicles turn off of a bitumen road and on to a dirt track; the backpackers have made the final transition from the known and the mapped into an abstracted space. The exact location of Mick Taylor's camp is unknown, effectively a mythic setting. Past and futile attempts to subdue the landscape are represented through the presence of abandoned and now decaying mining machinery. When the backpackers ask about the nature of his camp, Taylor responds that there are plenty of similar locations dotting the Outback, 'places people have forgotten about'. Once (and if) one leaves Taylor's camp, it can never be found again. Listening to the bushman's fireside banter one wonders whether the miners left or simply vanished into the landscape, consumed by the very space that they had attempted to usurp.

There is a divide between the mapped and hence the known, and the unfamiliar space that Taylor inhabits. He functions as an agent of the landscape; indeed, if the landscape connotes harshness and inhospitality Mick Taylor is its personification. He possesses the ability to vanish into the milieu, reappearing at will to the detriment of his prey, those who are not of the space and find it unfamiliar and overwhelming. In the film's final shot Taylor literally fades into the landscape; he is not a product of the landscape but 'in a sense, the landscape itself'⁴⁸. Taylor as an embodiment of the landscape's threat suggests also that the landscape is solely a site of death and peril. The threat embodied in Taylor is implicit in the landscape, and vice versa. At various points during the film, both Ben and Kristy escape Taylor's clutches, but find that they are no safer, still trapped as they are by the landscape. Taylor is the film's equivalent of Conrad's Kurtz. Like Kurtz, Taylor is comfortable existing in a space of isolation, and has no qualms about resorting to violence to achieve his goals.

Having travelled the same highways as the three protagonists as part of the research for this project, I recognise that the film's treatment of these spaces differs greatly from how they had appeared to me. This is in part due to the film's production in the South Australian desert rather than Western Australia where it is set, but it is also an indication of the nature of the *Wolf Creek* setting, that it is a heightened representation of the most desolate and macabre constructions of the Outback. As Scott and Biron note, '*Wolf Creek* skilfully plays on popular conceptions of inland Australia as empty and harsh'⁴⁹. There are no Indigenous Australian characters in the film, nor any signs of Aboriginal culture; with their absence goes the Outback's colonial past and construction, so that the landscape of *Wolf Creek* is not only threatening and lawless, but outside history and realism. It is the Outback as an alienating and abstracted space, the sum total of related fears toward empty space, isolation and silence. It is the desert of nightmares and horror stories, real and imagined.

⁴⁸ John Scott and Dean Biron, '*Wolf Creek*, rurality and the Australian gothic', *Continuum*, 24:2, (2010), p. 319

⁴⁹ Scott and Biron, 2010, 317

Similarly *Wake in Fright* establishes the Outback as an opposite to Sydney. For the protagonist John Grant and for the film's audience Sydney is represented as a place of cool colours and relief from the heat. Grant's girlfriend lives in Sydney; Sydney is the site of comforting human contact as opposed to the human contact of Bundanyabba, which is either depraved or violent. In Kenneth Cook's original novel, the Outback is represented as the absence of a specific landscape feature. It is described through heat, silence and emptiness, rather than through any concrete element; 'farther out in the heat was the silent centre of Australia, the Dead Heart'⁵⁰. Director Ted Kotcheff adapts this sense of abstraction well to the screen, emphasising the emptiness of the space, the inescapable heat, the constant sheen of sweat glistening on every actor's body and ubiquitous dust and flies hanging in the air. Kotcheff's insistence on hot colours at all times in the *mise en scene* is overwhelming for the film's audience⁵¹; the only relief is Grant's fantasy of lying on a beach, drinking beer and seducing his girlfriend, dripping wet from the ocean. Sydney, a city and hence a space of order, is portrayed as the unattainable goal for Grant. It is the destination of escape from the Outback and from barbarism; it is the antithesis to the drunken, violent and secular society of the 'Yabba, a town 'so isolated there's nowhere to go'. Of the film's opening shot, a 360 degree pan of an empty expanse of golden Outback, Kotcheff comments that it is an empty space that 'doesn't liberate you, but is claustrophobic and traps you'⁵². He observes that a certain kind of person is 'attracted to these empty spaces and being imprisoned by them'⁵³. If Mick Taylor represents the life ending qualities of the landscape in *Wolf Creek*, the drunken hyper-masculine models of *Wake in Fright* represent its maddening effect. In *Wake in Fright*, Grant is trapped by the sheer enormity of the space, and by the aggressively reinforced social order.

In place of Conrad's Kurtz, *Wake in Fright* has Doc Tydon. An educated man and an alcoholic, Tydon is content to live out his years in the vastness of the Outback where his penchants for depravity, sexual assault and addiction remain unchecked. He is the truest appropriation of Kurtz. Because 'all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz'⁵⁴ we are to understand that Kurtz is the European everyman, educated and sophisticated, a man of society. Tydon too, is sophisticated. A doctor by profession he wears a suit jacket and listens to opera, discussing contemporary philosophy while the other men fight. But, like Kurtz, he departs from society, choosing to exist in comparative isolation. He chooses a sordid existence but as he informs Grant, at least he knows who he is.

Viewed through the frame of fiction, landscape can be read as a text fulfilling a role in fiction as a constructed space, embodying narrative concerns. In *Heart of Darkness* it is the prehistoric and pre-civilised jungle, the antithesis to Europe. In *Wolf Creek* and *Wake in Fright* the Outback is a violent and chaotic space, defined predominantly

⁵⁰ Kenneth Cook, *Wake in Fright* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1980) p.6

⁵¹ 'Interview with director Ted Kotcheff', *Wake in Fright*. DVD. Madman. 2009

⁵² 'Audio commentary with director Ted Kotcheff and editor Anthony Buckley', *Wake in Fright*. DVD. Madman. 2009

⁵³ Ted Kotcheff in *Not Quite Hollywood: The Wild, Untold Story of OZploitation!*. Dir. Mark Huntley. City Films Worldwide. 2008

⁵⁴ Conrad, 2006, 49

through its opposition to the coast and the comforts available there, not the least of which is civilisation and order. Outside of fiction, landscape performs an identical function in the regulation and demarcation of spaces of order from spaces of chaos, when in reality, both order and chaos are abstractions, constructs. The separation between these two types of space is a human drawn line in the dirt, a pattern in the dust; landscape is a cultural fiction produced and substituted in place of 'the real'.

What makes the Outback vital to history and to culture is not its construction as the space of the 'other', but the necessity for this space, fulfilling a narrative function in the colonial 'fiction'. The construction of the Outback space was necessary for colonial Australia to establish the boundary between the subdued wilderness and the frightful unknown, the 'hideous blank'. Solace could be taken in the sight of the blank map; the emptiness it depicts helps to emphasise the comparative success of colonisation and the comfort of the familiar. 'Otherness' is banished to the far corners of the map, or the most isolated interiors. In fictions both textual and symbolic, that is to say, in 'stories' as well as 'real life', the Australian desert exists as the space of 'otherness'. The 'Outback' is the hyperreal label that has replaced the denoted physical tract of land in Central Australia. It is an invented space against which the progress of coastal Australia is measured.

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