

Driving the Narrative to Reconciliation: *The Tracker* as Road Picture

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Abstract The road picture can be considered one of the master narratives within the Australian Film Revival, from the *Mad Max* trilogy to *Crocodile Dundee* to *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Yet this genre has particular resonance in films featuring indigenous Australians. Even the titles allude to this connection, for example, *Walkabout*, *Backroads*, *Wrong Side of the Road*, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*.

This paper focuses on *The Tracker* (2002), written and directed by Rolf De Heer, set in the early 1920's during the Frontier phase. This film features a police search for an Aboriginal fugitive accused of killing a white woman; the party is led by a reluctant yet savvy Aboriginal tracker, played by David Gulpilil. *The Tracker* alludes to and draws from prior indigenous road pictures, yet it breaks new ground in narrative, character and style at a time when films such as *The Tracker* play a critical role in the reconciliation process. The journey dramatized in the film has many twists and surprises, and is a deft blend of serious drama, irony and satire as it examines the psychological interplay between the Fanatic, a vicious racist, and the Tracker. Like *Walkabout* (which also features Gulpilil), an Aboriginal functions as a guide for whites in unknown indigenous territory. Similar to *Wrong Side of the Road*, *The Tracker* uses music as political activism intended to challenge the white power order. And like *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *The Tracker* dramatizes white orchestrated searches for Aboriginal fugitives.

This paper explores three areas of innovation:

- 1) The multi-faceted role of the Tracker, played with finesse and intelligence by David Gulpilil. Refreshingly free of Aboriginal stereotypes, the Tracker is an astute observer, a wry commentator, a mocker, and a trickster who progressively empowers himself;
- 2) The landscape and the characters (captured in widescreen) which fluctuate between naturalism and surrealism, enhanced by Peter Coad's original paintings--presented as stunning stills.
- 3) The sound design—songs (written by De Heer, music by Graham Tardif) sung with great feeling and power by Archie Roach to capture the collective unconscious of Aboriginals past and present.

Space permitting, I will also contextualize *The Tracker* with recent new directions in the indigenous road film, including *Beneath Clouds* and *One Night the Moon*.

Keywords Indigenous Road Film: The Tracker

A significant number of groundbreaking films featuring Aboriginal Australians have appropriated the conventions of the road picture, presenting and exploring Aboriginal culture and history in dynamic ways. Even the titles allude to this genre, for example, *Walkabout*, *Backroads*, *Wrong Side of the Road*, *The Tracker* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Indeed, Aboriginals have spent a good portion of the last 200+ years “on the road,” so to speak, in a state of dispossession. However, in the post World War II period, Aboriginal activists have pursued their own critical journeys for citizenship, land rights, and most recently, reconciliation.

The very conditions that Aboriginals faced -- homelessness, alienation, their culture under siege, the search for new homes -- are the frequent ingredients of the road picture. This genre often links the road (paved, dirt, gravel, trail) to flight, rebellion, freedom and/or adventure. The road can provide a temporary or permanent way out of a repressive society, frequently, though not always, via a mechanized vehicle. The road trip also offers the possibility of personal growth, maturity, and/or transformation into a new identity, as well as the opportunities to cross and challenge boundaries. Frequently inherent in the road film is a challenge to and critique of the standards and mores of the civilization from which protagonist(s) flee. As Ina Rae Cohan and Steven Hark comment, "dominant ideologies generate fantasies of escape and opposition..." (Cohan and Hark, 1997, 3). Finally, the road can also function as a venue for payback and revenge. Often featuring violence as its creed, the road journey is linked to danger and death.

One of the most recent films in this subgenre, *The Tracker* (2002), written and directed by Rolf De Heer, represents the first feature to focus on the Frontier stage (1788-early 1930's), depicting one of the most "unspeakable aspects of Australian history" (Smaill, 2002, 31) when Aboriginal communities were under siege by a self-righteously brutal and ruthless white power order, and when Aboriginal people were hunted like animals. Set in 1922, *The Tracker* focuses on a search for an Aboriginal fugitive led by the Fanatic, a hell bent government police officer. Under his command are two other officers, the Follower, a greenhorn barely out of his teens, and the Veteran, an old timer. The party is dependent upon the fourth member of their troop, a seasoned Aboriginal Tracker to lead the way through the wilderness. As Belinda Smaill notes, the Tracker is an "...indispensable source of labor [to the authorities],... [enjoying]...few of the privileges of his fellow travelers... he is also frequently mistreated by them" (Smaill, 2002, 32). Thus, the Tracker must walk while they have horses; he is whipped, slapped, knocked down, and threatened with a cocked pistol. Further, he must witness two violent attacks by the Fanatic on peaceful and innocent Aboriginals. Given the pathological state of the Fanatic, the Tracker could be killed at any time; thus, he must walk a fine line between servitude and assertiveness, "playing" the explosive Fanatic very carefully.

Though the film is realist drama, it also frequently plays as satire, with David Gulpilil as the Tracker putting a deftly comic spin on his role, which is a more expanded and complex version of his solemn (and primarily silent) tracker role in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The Tracker is an astute observer, a wry commentator, a mocker, a trickster. Gulpilil gives a confident, controlled and graceful performance full of poise, even down to his elegant walk, often with a heavy chain around his neck which is tethered to the Fanatic's arm. This film is critical in several ways. First, as the journey progresses, *The Tracker* charts the protagonist's growth from an indentured servant to one who challenges, stands up to and thwarts the Fanatic, committing the "unthinkable crime of enslaving a white man." (Collins and Davis, 2004, 15). The Tracker refuses to be a victim, frequently the fate of Aboriginal males

who are disempowered, emasculated, or killed, as in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, *Blackfellas* and *Australian Rules*, or they self-destruct, as in *Walkabout*. Secondly, the Tracker becomes an inspiration and role model for the Follower who sees a kindred spirit in his own growing outrage at the Fanatic's barbaric acts. The Follower's open-mindedness and enlightenment suggest that whites have much to learn from Aboriginals—survival skills, generosity of spirit, and justice, Western and Aboriginal -- in an atmosphere of respect and shared humanity. As an Aboriginal living in Darwin wrote after seeing the film, “[*The Tracker*] is an important part of our ongoing cultural recognition and acceptance of our own Aboriginal culture, and will go a long way in assisting in the reconciliation process...” (De Heer, 2002, 1) If one of the goals of reconciliation is reversing “historical amnesia” (Collins and Davis, 2004, 76) and “[t]alking about the injuries of the past, listening to the victims who give evidence of abuses, acknowledging what...happened...[and] offering contrition, as Macintyre and Clark argue in *The History Wars* (Macintyre and Clark, 2003, 158), then this film is part of the first step in the the healing of these historical wounds. At screenings in Adelaide (where Archie Roach performed his music live during film screening), Darwin, Cairns and Freemantle, De Heer has commented that not only Aboriginal but white audiences were in attendance, suggesting that this film provided an important common meeting ground. He has also noted that Aboriginals have a sense of “ownership” over and pride in *The Tracker* which they call “our film” (unlike other well-meaning films such as *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Australian Rules* which embarrass, even horrify Aboriginals).

Thirdly, *The Tracker* engages Australian history with a deep sensitivity to Aboriginals, Aboriginal culture and viewpoint which resonates into the present. The Tracker himself “drives” the narrative which is composed of three phases: 1) the initial search into the bush with the Fanatic in charge, including two attacks on Aboriginals; 2) mutiny by the Follower who makes the Fanatic his prisoner with the Fanatic put on trial by the Tracker; 3) the fugitive caught by his tribe and brought to tribal justice with the assistance of the Tracker. This paper focuses on *The Tracker* as a rich, complex and stylistically innovative road picture

What are the Tracker's survival and coping strategies? It must be noted that the Tracker speaks his own tribal language, two versions of English, slang and educated, as well as Latin! Thus he has the verbal dexterity for all contingencies. First of all, the Tracker's strategy is consistent with that of historical Aboriginals. As John Scheckter has commented, upon encountering whites they would often withhold or manipulate information as a form of “cultural reticence.” Scheckter elaborates, “...aside from the obvious thrill of pleasing an audience or playing a joke, such limitations would keep secret the locations of hunting grounds and water sources vital to a tribe's survival” (Scheckter, 1999, 125). Clearly, the Tracker's cultural reticence protects the fugitive, keeping the party at least half a day's travel behind to the point where the search becomes secondary to the psychological interplay

(and physical confrontation) between the Fanatic and the Tracker who both vie for control of the search.

Secondly, the Tracker's initial tactics include a variety of inflections of "boss," ranging from obedient to sarcastic. First of all, he can be serious and respectful. When they approach the first group of Aboriginals in the bush, the Tracker comments, "They're peaceful, boss" (this in the hope that the Fanatic will decide will pass them by, unharmed). Or he can be sardonic; as the fugitive continues to elude them, the Tracker deadpans, "...dumb black fella' sure slippery, boss."

In addition, the Tracker's politically correct ironic statements put the quest in the larger perspective of the Aboriginal/white Australian power order. He is no fool. After the first slaughter of several men and women, the Tracker mutters to the Follower (probably masking his own distress), "No such thing as an innocent black. The only innocent black is a dead black." And then to the Fanatic, "We better keep after the *other* savage, boss." Finally, when the Fanatic threatens the Tracker with hanging for disobeying one of his orders, repeatedly whips him, and shoots at his feet, the Tracker declares with a straight face (after several thinly veiled polite, "Yes, boss"), "Poor black fella' been born for that noose." The Fanatic, in spite of himself, is so taken back by the Tracker's cleverness, that he joins the Tracker in a prolonged hearty laugh.

However, as the trip progresses, no amount of wit and humor can counter or mitigate the atrocities committed by the Fanatic. One of De Heer's most salient visual features is the incorporation of paintings by artist Peter Coad, who was present during part of the shoot, and who made sketches during the filming, coloring them in on location and back in his studio. These paintings are intercut with live footage throughout the film to present the climax of many of the film's most violent scenes, particularly violence done to Aboriginals. One of the most horrific sequences takes place early in the film, when the party comes upon a group of innocent Aboriginal men and women. The Fanatic tortures and kills them, then orders their bodies strung up in trees.

When the scene begins, the Fanatic and the Follower line the Aboriginals up, put them in chains, slap them, pull their hair, and scream at them a few inches away from their faces. One of the most appalling treatments is the Fanatic forcefully drawing out the tongue of an elder Aboriginal man, and pressing his cocked pistol downward into the tongue. At the moment the Fanatic fires his gun, De Heer cuts to the painting that shows all the Aboriginals facing forward (as if in a long shot). Blood gushes from the man's tongue, as well as the breast of one of the women who has also been shot. The eyes of the Aboriginals – rendered larger than life -- are wide in terror, their arms thrown back with the impact of the bullets. The background is awash in ochre--its reddish-orange hue reinforcing this bloody act. On the soundtrack, we hear the victims screaming and groaning as they are hit from the barrage of gunshots. This painting or "still" halts the narrative flow, forcing the spectator to examine the larger canvas, graphically and

historically. Further, this painting is reminiscent of Aboriginal rock paintings, and functions as an indelible rendering of history and a permanent record of these crimes perpetrated by whites against Aboriginal people. The horrific totality of the event is rendered for the several second duration of the painting-shot. When De Heer cuts back to the aftermath of the slaughter, the Aboriginals are lying on the ground, dead, in pools of blood. On the sound track we hear a plaintive song sung by Archie Roach, "They're my people," suggesting the Tracker's thoughts and thinly masked devastation as he kneels on the ground for support, his head bowed.

Though this massacre functions as an immediate catharsis for the Fanatic (but not for the Follower, who sobs uncontrollably, his face in his hands), the Tracker's "inability" to find the fugitive makes the Fanatic even more impatient. He becomes increasingly unpredictable and bloodthirsty. Later, the Fanatic lashes out at the Tracker who temporarily leaves camp one night to hunt for bush tucker. When the Tracker returns with rabbit for dinner, the enraged Fanatic summarily knocks the Tracker down and shackles him by putting a heavy clamp around his neck with a chain for a tether. Unbelievably, the Fanatic soon kills one of his own, sadistically attacking the critically wounded Veteran late one night by jamming a red hot stick from the campfire deep into the open wound, while muffling his screams with the palm of his hand--an act the Tracker observes.

Realizing the Tracker's volatility, the Tracker executes a series of moves to undermine the trek, or stop it completely. Rather than using cultural reticence, however, he becomes more proactive, still demonstrating, however, his playful sense of humor and trickster persona. First, he plays with the Follower's naivete. Even though the Follower is appalled by the actions of Fanatic during the massacre of the Aboriginals, he is still wary of the Tracker and continues to align himself with his boss. This is demonstrated in a scene where he questions the methods of the Tracker, and even his worth in the search, highly suspicious of the tracks of the fugitive which the Tracker "reads" in the landscape. Irritated, the Follower complains to the Fanatic, "Anyone can see he's not really tracking...just following his nose, hoping for the best." In a rare moment of calm reflection, the Fanatic lets the scenario play itself out, enjoying the humiliation of the Follower, who cautiously gets off his horse, beckoned by the Tracker, who chuckles silently.

In the middle of a large expanse of crushed white rocks, The Tracker, smiling, motions to the Follower to kneel down and study a tiny indentation in the soil where a rock has been disturbed and moved. He exclaims, "There, that stone, boss, belongs there, been kicked away two hours ago." The Follower, confounded, comments, "There's *millions* of stones," as he looks at the large field of tiny white rocks ahead of him, as if to wonder how one microscopic shift can be discerned. But he realizes that the Tracker has him, because of the precision of evidence presented. "Is that all you need?" he queries innocently, and then softly apologizes for being so critical. The Tracker smiles, either out of relief -- he has been convincing enough to satiate the Follower -- or delight -- he has put one over on him. (Later on, with the

stakes higher, The Tracker will again prey on the Follower's gullibility in a clever scenario designed to have the Follower think he and the Fanatic were all attacked by a group of avenging Aboriginals.)

Secondly, the Tracker even puts one over on the Fanatic, using what could be called tongue in cheek "cultural mystery" to confound him. As they approach a clearing, the Tracker spies the fugitive about 100 yards ahead in the brush. To distract the Fanatic, who could easily see the fugitive, the Tracker stops and turns, his body blocking that of the fugitive in the background. The Tracker starts a giddy dance and chants, his body rolling from side to side, arms flailing, as he kicks up his legs, his face in a silly grin. He remarks, "That sacred country there, boss, no good at night." The Fanatic stares at the Tracker and sighs, even though the Follower urges him to keep going until nightfall. The Fanatic shakes his head, wary of going forward, commenting, "He's useless, no point in trying when the spirits get into him."

And then, out of the blue, the Tracker attempts to kill the Fanatic, transforming himself into the violent aggressor, taking on the Fanatic's behavior and crossing the line for appropriate behavior for a Tracker. It's as if the Tracker's aforementioned "crazy behavior" was designed to throw the Fanatic and the Follower off balance and give them a sense of false complacency so that when the Tracker tries to drown the Fanatic, it comes as a complete surprise. The scene begins when the three are climbing the rim of rocks which jut out several hundred feet above a deep pool of water. The Tracker walks in front of the Fanatic who is on horseback, and eyes the pool below. He suddenly jumps, slipping and sliding down the face of the rocks, dragging the fanatic off his horse by the chain that connects them. They both plunge into the water below with a loud splash, struggling underwater and wrestling for control. The Tracker wraps the chain around and around the Fanatic's body, jamming a large branch connected to the chain under a rock in order to drown him. The Fanatic surfaces from the water several times, as the Tracker jumps on him, continuing to dunk him. Heaving and coughing, and gasping for air, they both finally emerge from the water, grabbing the rocks at the edge of the pool. The Fanatic is furious, and it appears that he is going to severely beat the Tracker. The Tracker, however, without missing a beat, surprises and completely disarms the Fanatic, "innocently" explaining his behavior, "Can't swim, boss!" adding a subversive comic snap to this event, which is necessary for his survival after his enactment of his "fantasy of escape and opposition," to rephrase Cohan and Hark.

By now, the Fanatic is not only jumpy and paranoid after his near-death, but doubly vengeful as well. To make things worse, his horse has been hit by an Aboriginal spear and runs away. Thus when he spies a group of Aboriginal men, women and children around a campfire a few hundred feet ahead in the brush later, he fires point blank without hesitation. This time the intercut painting renders four victims in close up rather than in long shot. In the center of the painting is an elder whose beard is white with fright, his right shoulder bloodied; to his right is a child with a gunshot wound in the head.

The child's hand is clutched by his mother on the left portion of the screen, as if she is frantically trying to pull him away. Their eyes bulge with terror, their mouths wide open in silent screams as we hear several blasts of the shotgun. When we return to the aftermath of the attack, the Follower explodes, outraged with this second massacre, and unable to sit passively by anymore. "They were innocent women and children!" he screams at the smug Fanatic as he quickly disarms and shackles him, and turns *him* into a prisoner. Like the Tracker, the Follower has crossed the boundary of the law. The Follower has committed a felony by shackling and arresting his superior, abruptly changing the course and nature of his journey, assuming a new identity as the official in charge. Now that the Fanatic has been disempowered, we wonder, will the Follower be able to continue with the search for the fugitive? How will he treat the Tracker? What will the Tracker do now that he is essentially free?

As the new boss man, the Follower is tested right away that night when it appears that the Tracker is planning to poison them both. Off by himself, the Tracker prepares a mixture of leaves, berries, saliva and an insect which is crushed into the mix with the assistance of an unidentified hand. (It is not clear if it belongs to the fugitive, or another Aboriginal.) Sitting around the campfire, they start to eat the rabbit that the Tracker caught and prepared. In chains under a tree, the Fanatic attempts a power play in order to intimidate the Follower. He announces that the Tracker has poisoned the rabbit, and taunts the Tracker, challenging him to exchange his portion with him. The Follower stops in the middle of chewing, his face frozen in horror; he spits into his hat, and, astonished, stares at the Tracker, mouth open. The Tracker calmly and confidently gets up, and exchanges his rabbit with the Fanatic. He eats the Fanatic's portion, bursting into laughter, and, yes, remains very much alive. Like the pool sequence, this scene mixes a very real threat of death with casual humor, and reinforces the Tracker's ingenuity.

Later we realize what the Tracker was up to: the Follower sleeps all too well through the night from the "potion" that the Tracker prepared, while he enacts his plan to bring the Fanatic to justice. In the two subsequent sequences, De Heer compares two forms of justice, white and Aboriginal, one gleaned from the ideals of Western democratic law, the other from Aboriginal tribal law, with the Tracker serving as judge in each.

The sequence where the Tracker hangs the Fanatic is stunning in its daring and economy. In the background, the Fanatic, in chains, sits against a tree facing forward. The camera rests at eye level during a long sustained take while he reels off a litany of angry self-righteous white paternalism and assumed privilege of a settler culture, ranging from evoking the highest power, "We could not serve God any better than improving these poor degraded creatures," to the self-delusional, "I taught him (his former Tracker) the white way. He's a happy man."

While the Fanatic raves in the background, we see the Tracker's legs as he paces from foreground to background, flipping loops of rope over on the ground; finally, a piece of rope twirls down with a noose at the end.

Standing tall and solemn, the Tracker steps back, giving the Fanatic about as much time to offer his plea as the Fanatic did before he fired upon the second group of Aboriginals – a few seconds. The Tracker declares: “You are charged with the murder of innocent people. How do you plead?...[silence]... On behalf of my people and all people I’m your judge and jury. I find you guilty as charged. By your actions you have forfeited the right to live among your fellow humans. I sentence you to hang by the neck until dead.” (Unlike *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, another critical Aboriginal road picture, wherein payback and revenge is enacted by Blacksmith upon innocent women, in this case, the reprisal is directed appropriately on the perpetrator of racial hatred and harm).

The Tracker hoists the Fanatic up, his limp body dangling in silhouette against the rising sun. The dazzling color scheme approximates the Aboriginal flag, which incorporates the colors black, red and yellow. This shot of the horizon is equally split with black filling the top (emblematic of the Aboriginal people), red on the bottom (for the earth and Aboriginal spiritual bond to the land, as well as the bloodshed caused by the settler culture), and the yellow globe in the middle (for the sun as giver of life). This shot is a powerful image of Aboriginal payback: a dead white racist against a modern rallying sign for Aboriginals. On the sound track we hear Archie Roach singing, “You have taken my country, exterminated by your hand. I can never return until there’s contrition.” The song not only suggests the Tracker’s thoughts, but also functions as a collective Aboriginal scolding of the current Howard Administration over its refusal to give an official apology for historical persecution.

Now the Tracker takes care of his second piece of business – bringing the fugitive to justice, a process handled by the fugitive’s tribe that involves calm consultation among the Tracker and the tribal elders, an Aboriginal woman and the fugitive. After a series of discussions, the Tracker picks up a spear and throws it, impaling the thigh of the fugitive. He explains to the baffled Follower that the fugitive (who has admitted his crime to the elders and the Tracker) not only raped the woman, but that she was the “wrong skin for him” -- that is, he violated strict tribal kinship laws, in addition to committing a serious assault. The hurled spear, a painful and debilitating means of tribal justice, implies a greater punishment— judgment of the fugitive by spiritual forces. The fugitive could suffer more, or even die. Significantly, rather than perpetrating cultural mystery as The Tracker did at the beginning of the trek, he now shares “cultural knowledge” (Collins and Davis, 2003, 16) with the Follower. As Collins and Davis have noted, The Tracker is the one who is ‘at home’, welcoming The Follower to...[his] country...”, where the Follower is a guest and stranger (Collins and Davis, 16). This is the reversal of most films featuring Aboriginals where they are regarded as intruders on their own land

Now that we know the nature of the crime the fugitive actually committed, and that he did not kill a white woman, it is clear that the chase was an excuse for the Fanatic to invade Aboriginal land on a murderous

quest, typical of white practices during the Frontier period. Once the Tracker's responsibilities to the tribe are completed, he bids goodbye to the Follower, and rides off into the landscape on horseback. He gleefully sends up the Fanatic's perception of Aboriginals as savages as he sarcastically offers an explanation to the Follower for the disappearance of the Fanatic's body: "Them Black fellas' probably cooked him and ate him! You know, we're all cannibals!"

For his performance in *The Tracker*, David Gulpilil was honored with awards for best actor from several Australian organizations: the Australian Film Institute, Inside Film, which also gave him a living legend award for his contribution to the film industry, and the Film Critics Circle, which also gave *The Tracker* its best film award. Gulpilil's mature, transcendent role in *The Tracker* recoups his victimhood in *Walkabout*, countering the emasculating and destructive effect that white society has on Aboriginal men, and by implication, Australian families (ruptured and bereft by the absence of the male). Gulpilil has proudly commented that playing an "Aboriginal man in full command of his environment and his narrative has meant more to ...[me] than all ... [my] past work combined" (Gleeson, 2002, 34).

This critical film foregrounds the way in which one Aboriginal bravely and successfully changes the course of his road trip, challenging the boundaries between black and white, victim and judge, powerless and empowered, as he transforms his life from that of a slave to a wise, judicious man in charge of his life journey. The Tracker is a new kind of hero who gives Aboriginals back their dignity and history. This film unlocks the past compassionately and respectfully, thus fulfilling one of the major goals of reconciliation, to explore historical injustices on behalf of indigenous people.

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