



(no) vacancy – Jarrod Van Der Ryken

A lone figure walks through the unmistakable scorched landscape of outback Australia. Shot at dusk, the single channel video depicts the transition from the bright heat of the day, to the desolate darkness of night. As the sun hangs close to the horizon, deep shadows are cast across the stony ground from low lying shrubs, partially obscuring the figure. As night falls the visual separation of earth and sky, landscape and figure become increasingly difficult to maintain.

The transition from day to night that forms the key development in *(no) vacancy*, is an effect created through editing, rather than a document of the time spent in the landscape. Shot at fifty frames per second and edited at half that many frames, the almost twenty minutes of raw footage is expanded to twice the length. Likewise, the transition from light to dark is not achieved in-camera, instead it is the effect created by an extended fade to a black screen.

The act of walking through the landscape is further embellished through the clear use of cinematic conventions. The soundtrack creates a foreboding within the work. The use of *cinema verite* suggests a secondary presence, which implies narrative. Having been shot at dusk, known as the *magic hour* for filming, further imbues the work with a palette indicative of cinema. In this way the landscape in *(no) vacancy*, and the figure that moves through it, are set before us as fictions, echoing the concept of *Terra Incognita*; the southern continent imagined by Europeans two thousand years prior to their ships reaching the Australian coastline.¹

Van Der Ryken's work is often concerned with the memory of place. *Blackwell Street* (2015), for example, physically reconstructed aspects of his grandparent's house. *(no) vacancy* continues this interest in place, though here the reference is not personal memory, but the industrialised memory of place as filtered through cinema.

Terra Incognita, the unknown land, had been imagined as a utopia on one hand and an unusual and dangerous place on the other. The reality of the arid landmass was disappointing in terms of the European utopian expectation, but affirming in that it was unusual and dangerous.² Amidst its recognised dangers, the landscape has maintained its role as a setting for the projection of a displaced imaginary. Thus we find the history of Australian Cinema obsessed with its landscape: as setting, symbol and myth. Often this has been tinged with nationalist pride, but with the emergence of the New Australian Cinema in the 1970s, the 'outback' was often imagined as a space of horror and fear.³ Indeed, Jonathan Rayner argues that the Australian Gothic is an overarching trait that can be identified across a diversity of genres in Australian cinema.⁴

Australian Gothic cinema shares with European Gothic literature of the 18th and 19th century an emphasis on a metaphorically laden landscape that, with uncanny and possibly supernatural overtones, threatens to engulf the protagonist, as a sense of dread pervades.⁵ Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton's recent study of the representation of landscape, across Australian film, theatre and literature, continually returns to the pervasiveness of the Gothic and finds it transplanted onto representations of the desert, the Australian North and Tasmania.⁶ The desert has a particularly important role here, following Roslynn D. Haynes's influential interpretation of the desert as a site of the Australian Gothic.⁷

Cinematically, *Wake in Fright* (1971) is canonical in this context⁸ and is specifically relevant to *(no) vacancy* in terms of its arid setting, invocation of the Australian Gothic and its allusion to hospitality (evident in the title). Here, John Grant, having lost his money and stranded in a landscape inhospitable to the traveller, is forced to rely on the hospitality of the local non-Indigenous population of Bundanyabba.⁹ Hospitality pervades the film, as John is constantly offered beer, food, accommodation and travel. As Jacques Derrida notes, an 'ideal' unlimited hospitality must open itself to the foreigner, and expect no reciprocity. Yet this is the impossible structure, or *aporia*, of hospitality; for if one is completely open, then the power they have, the sovereignty over their house in which hospitality is offered, is lost: for it is completely open then it is no longer 'theirs' from which to offer hospitality.¹⁰ Certainly, the ideal of openness and lack of reciprocity is undermined in *Wake in Fright*, as the (high) price exacted for the hospitality is John's assimilation into a brutal and deranged masculinity. This is a structure we find replicated in *Wolf Creek* (2005) where the travellers, in their acceptance of much-needed hospitality, find themselves victims of Mick Taylor's psychotic, violent masculinity.¹¹ In both films, the 'hosts' relationship to 'their' land is one of reckless exploitation, and is explicitly linked to industrial mining and the mechanised slaughter of native wildlife, either for recreation (*Wake in*

Fright) or to protect industrial uses of the land (*Wolf Creek*), as revealed in Mick's fireside tales at the abandoned mine site he occupies.

If the land is inhospitable to the travellers, the local hospitality that would purportedly offer respite from this, descends into nightmare. The 'locals' here are non-Indigenous. Themselves foreigners, their warped hospitality betrays their own place on the land, which descends not from a relationship of hospitality, but one of terror and invasion. The metaphorical landscape of the Australian Gothic stems from this, drawing on repressed colonial ghosts. Yet, in a way, the generic trope also perpetuates this, for the metaphorical potential of the landscape relies on its supposed 'emptiness' and tacitly enacts *terra nullius*. Stadler, Mitchell and Carleton, throughout their study, note the lack of acknowledgement and representation of Indigenous populations, and the lack of regional specificity, and suggest that such omissions are required to maintain the metaphorical power of the landscape within the Gothic, even as it alludes to the crimes of colonialism.¹²

Van Der Ryken's traveller, wandering Quilpie shire, and its cinematic enclosure, alludes to the Australian Gothic tradition and the dread and danger of an arid, apparently inhospitable landscape. Yet, by taking what might be a brief shot in Australian Gothic cinema, and extending this for almost forty minutes, without narrative, (*no*) *vacancy* ultimately nullifies the power of the trope. As the sun sets, we are not menaced by the potential peril of the figure, but instead, without a narrative framing of dread, we are mesmerised by the specific qualities of the place, as we look towards the dawn.

The title of the work, (*no*) *vacancy*, alludes to emptiness, "vacancy", but also inhospitability, "no vacancy". Ultimately, however, the work draws on Gothic ghosts, which rest on emptiness and inhospitability, only to dismantle their power by pushing this code of representation to its limits; emphasising that for the non-Indigenous traveller, the land has never been vacant: "(no) vacancy."

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¹ Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton. *Imagined Landscapes: Geovisualizing Australian Spatial Narratives*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016. p.161.

² *Ibid*, p.163.

³ John Scott and Dean Biron. "Wolf Creek, Rurality and the Australian Gothic." *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 24.2 (2010): 307-22; Stadler, Mitchell and Carleton. p.79-80.

⁴ Jonathan Rayner. "Gothic Definitions: The New Australian 'Cinema of Horrors'." *Antipodes* 25.1 (2011): 91-97.

⁵ Miranda, filmed in slow motion, disappearing into the landscape in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), is a classic example, and is alluded to in the slow motion footage of (*no*) *vacancy*.

⁶ Stadler, Mitchell and Carleton, see p.66, 87-88, 125-26, for example.

⁷ Roslynn D. Haynes. *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. p.184-208.

⁸ The film is discussed in the context of the Australian Gothic by, for example, Haynes, Rayner, Scott and Biron, and Stadler et al.

⁹ A fictional town, generally acknowledged to be Broken Hill (see Haynes and Stadler et al.)

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida. "Foreigner Question." *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Cultural Memory in the Present. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000. p.25, 53-55.

¹¹ The difference is that in *Wolf Creek* the travellers are *subjected to* this regime, rather than *assimilated into* it, as is ultimately the case in *Wake in Fright*.

¹² Stadler, Mitchell and Carleton, see p.66, 79, 95, 129, 134-38, 168-69, for example.