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Violent Vibes

'Stimmung' in Alan Baxter's 'The Roo'

Abstract: Alan Baxter's 2020 novella 'The Roo', which began as a social media joke in response to an article about an aggressive garden-eating Kangaroo, is a slasher-horror, self-described "gonzo" narrative. Unsurprisingly, gore and conflict are prominent fixtures in 'The Roo', and they quickly form a rhythm, a pattern of violence. The disruptive violence of the text, along with several of its other generative elements, constitute the text's 'Stimmung'. A reading for 'Stimmung' uncovers the capacities to which the novella can affectively engage with readers, by means of its genre play, performative efficiency, and especially its violent resonances. My close reading reveals the extent to which 'The Roo' takes up and takes on different forms of violence, whether it resonates with Rob Nixon's conception of slow violence or what Slavoj Žižek refers to as performative efficiency. The novel's cycles of violence put center stage the links between domestic abuse and rural dispossession. The article attunes to and consolidates these conceptions of violence and 'Stimmung' to gesture toward key elements producing presence and aesthetic experience, drawing from the scholarship of Rita Felski and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, amongst others.

Introduction

See You Outback

A massive kangaroo, clearly disproportionately so, rips off a man's arm and kills him with it. In another scene, the kangaroo is peppered with gunshots and run over by a truck, but it rises again, continuing its onslaught. Alan Baxter's self-published 'The Roo' is, according to the afterword, "blood-soaked gonzo mayhem"¹ and readers are certainly encouraged to agree. The novella affords its readers a chance to reflect on the genesis of generic conventions by isolating the way that violence supports the broader attunement and poetics of the text. It is no surprise that slasher-horror features violence, but it remains under-discussed how violence's features formulate the slasher-horror text and cultivate an aesthetic experience. The cinematic genre as novel genre is likewise undertheorized, assigned the most attention in film studies.

British-Australian author Alan Baxter, known for his dark fantasy and horror, began writing 'The Roo' during a Twitter exchange with several colleagues and friends. The novella garnered significant public attention, not only for its eponymous monster, but also as a 2021 Ditmar Finalist for Best Novella. The preface explains that the discussion began as a result of a news article titled: 'Australian Town Terrorised By Muscular Kangaroo Attacking People And Eating Gardens', put out by the LADbible news site.² The kangaroo, which had apparently injured three people, inspired conversations about the ridiculousness of but also the basis for fear and 'terror' instigated by the beloved Australian animal. Before long, the writers discussing the article pitched a pulpy Australian horror novella

1 Alan Baxter: *The Roo*, p. 123.

2 See Tom Wood: *Australian Town Terrorised*, n. p.

that centered around a monstrous kangaroo, and a mock-up cover was made by author and cover designer Kealan Patrick Burke. After that, the group urged Alan Baxter to take up writing it, as he was the Australian horror writer that most prominently engaged in the conversation.

The novella, set in a village named Morgan Creek, follows the rampage of a demonic killer kangaroo, summoned by a book that might be from Persia, might be made of human flesh, and that might have been purchased by a Transylvanian, or rather Romanian traveling aristocratic colonist to Australia, who decided to build his house on top of a mine. The rampage in 'The Roo' begins by killing off each character that it introduces in the first few chapters before it shifts to the investigation and discovery of the eponymous monster, led in large part by Patrick and Sheila McDonough, who are the closest characters to human protagonists that the novella offers. Ultimately, the narrative, which is polyphonic and frequently jumps between perspectives, culminates when the predominantly white village's men attempt to square off against the kangaroo armed to the teeth in a display of hyper-masculinity. Their efforts, supported and only made possible by the extensive communication network of the Country Women's Association, are futile, as the kangaroo is unable to be stopped even after being run over and shot repeatedly. Instead, the women discover the source of the kangaroo, and Pauline, a character who has been missing and assumed dead for most of the novella, is revealed to have summoned the creature by incorrect incantation. She sacrifices herself to put the killings to a halt.

In the following, I unpack the violent vibes emanating from 'The Roo' to demonstrate how its juxtaposition of cycles of violence produce a presence, following Felski and Gumbrecht, in two major steps.

First, I introduce the concept of 'Stimmung'. More specifically, I establish its relation to generic conventions and suggest that genre emerges from 'Stimmung'. Secondly, in a reading for 'Stimmung', I analyze the poetics of violence constructed by 'The Roo', which is central to the creation of its horror-soaked aesthetic experience. I demonstrate that the normalization of violence creates different spatio-temporal cycles, which, in their conflict, afford acknowledgements of slow violence, particularly in relation to domestic abuse.

Stimmung, Vibes, Attunement

More often than not, in genre theory, the concepts that are central to genre fiction are tied heavily to certain affective, emotion-laden responses. In Science Fiction, the 'novum' and the ensuing source of wonder are of key importance,³ both in discussing earlier iterations of the genre and its supposed development or decay. The mystery and thriller genres are tied to gamification, suspense and tension, and cultivate a puzzling nature.⁴ Suspense and tension can of course be cogni-

3 See Darko Suvin: *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, pp. 63-84, where he introduces the term.

4 See Charles J. Rzepka: *Detective Fiction*, p. 10; George Grella: *Murder and Manners*, pp. 30 ff..

tively distinguished to some extent, but their reliance on expectation, anxiety, and other emotional capacities are no doubt part of what distinguishes genres that put a spotlight on them. The language that readers and critics use in reviews frequently circles on the vibe of the text: the mood, tone, or feelings invoked by a text, without always referring to the readers' own feelings.

What readers reach toward when they communicate their responses to a text is comparable to the process that Rita Felski discusses in her work 'Hooked. Art and Attachment'. For Felski, this readerly act is one of attunement. "It is not a feeling-about but a *feeling-with*: a relation that is more than the sum of its parts"⁵ Attunement is, thus, not only about the intersubjective feelings produced by a text, not the 'fear', 'shame' or 'anger' produced by a work, but rather it "is about things resonating, aligning, coming together"⁶ This is a connective process for Felski, associated with the way a text's presence can be related to or accessed by the way art might let us be "captivated by a singular mood or a contagious atmosphere"⁷ This form of response is one that is more intense, more affective, and more enchanting in its engagement than that of simple appreciation. Yet, texts produce a presence that can be attuned to by various actors (and in different ways), which concepts like aesthetic experience, mood, tone, or even the non-representational descriptions of affective potentials might communicate. The materiality of the text, along with interpretive elements and readerly experience, inform this presence. In so doing, these elements are thus implicated in genre formation, but also in the continued reification of genre categories, which are, of course, unstable and frequently changing.

While Felski chooses to orient attunement away from 'Stimmung',⁸ I would rather like to emphasize their connection by placing it in concert with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's work on presence and 'Stimmung'. In tandem, concepts of attunement elucidate means by which we might come to describe a text's 'Stimmung' in a way that extends beyond the often-elastic language of emotion and affect. Rather than subjective but passionate textual interpretations, approaches to attunement and 'Stimmung' prioritize the elements of generic formation. Such elements necessarily provoke attunement and cultivate affective responses.

On a basic translational level, the German term 'Stimmung' has been translated to 'atmosphere' or 'mood' most commonly - and sometimes both in concert, but also rendered as 'tone' or 'ambience'. One of its particular nuances is its capacity for connoting tuning, 'stimmen', and thus a harmonizing principle. Following Gumbrecht, I argue that 'Stimmung' is a term that can be used to address not the affective potentials and forces that emerge from a text, but rather the conditions by which aesthetic experiences themselves emerge. Gumbrecht argues in 'Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung' that specific moods and atmospheres, specific 'Stimmungen'⁹ "present themselves to us as nuances that challenge our powers

5 Rita Felski: *Hooked*, p. 42.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

8 See *ibid.*, pp. 74-77.

9 I use the German plural 'Stimmungen' throughout.

of discernment and description".¹⁰ These nuances might be found most apparently in the descriptive (but also rhythmic) uses of music and weather in a text, but the material presence of the text must not be ignored either. In this sense, by "paying attention to the textual dimension of the forms that envelop us and our bodies as a physical reality"¹¹ we can discuss the 'inner feelings' that materialize. The 'Stimmung' of a text does not require a representational approach, since, as Gumbrecht rightly notes, we can listen to a poem without understanding its language and still experience emotional responses.¹² However, departing from Gumbrecht, I would not go so far as to assign all elements of a text to 'Stimmung',¹³ although I agree that a readerly response to a 'Stimmung' could do so.

While Gumbrecht focuses on the performative quality of textual practice, one that has moved beyond harmonization, I am more interested in the performative attunement and the stage-setting that are part and parcel of our interpretations of texts. I move beyond Gumbrecht to argue that the prosody of words, the activation of our speech tract and left inferior frontal gyrus as we read by means of subvocalization,¹⁴ the way our eyes capture the page, and representation, form and our literary frames come together to produce a presence as a text, although empirical measures are not the focus of this article. In this reading, I particularly chime with Felski's reading of text attachment, which claims that one can just as easily be "drawn to what is disorienting, discordant, uncanny: to find oneself attuned with what is out of tune".¹⁵ As a result, my approach is more formalist and methodologically grounded than Gumbrecht's, although I must exclude empirical affective approaches based on readerships. I have already hinted at the sense of presence and rhythm that is vital to this process by mentioning vibes. 'Stimmung', then, for me, is a spatio-temporal relationship constructed by a combination of representative and material elements, one that envelops us and with which we can attune to – elements which cultivate form.¹⁶ This form exists both intra- and extra-textually. A 'Stimmung' engulfs on both levels, the act of aesthetic experience itself is situated within spatial-temporal relations, and so too are the spaces and times invoked intra-textually themselves refracted and attuned to. When I speak of the 'Stimmung' of a text, I am referring to the intra-textual level, one which is also pre-conditional in processes of multidirectional exchange with the extra-textual 'Stimmung'. In other words, if literary texts are understood as processes of world-making, 'Stimmung' is a palpable manifestation of that world and the ways in which it transmits its sense of presence, aesthetic experience and mood beyond those confines.

A reading for 'Stimmung' can be arrived at by extending the work of Jonathan Flatley and Birgit Breidenbach, who both engage with the term in different ways. For Flatley, this effort to activate 'Stimmung' entails what he calls 'reading for

10 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht: *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung*, p. 4.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

12 *Ibid.*

13 See *ibid.*, pp. 5 f.

14 See Keith Rayner et al.: *Psychology of Reading*, p. 189; Phillip. K. McGuire et al.: *Functional Anatomy of Inner Speech and Auditory Verbal Imagery*.

15 Rita Felski: *Hooked*, p. 75.

16 See Caroline Levine: *Forms*, pp. 1-23.

mood', a reading which attends to the historical and social situatedness of a text by means of a "speculative recreation of the understanding of the reader's mood embedded in a given textual practice, its theory-in-practice of the mood of its readers".¹⁷ This is done by means of a 'structure of address', the manner in which the text constructs its own readership without explicitly addressing it, which can take forms ranging from the style of the writing itself to expression through generic conventions. For Breidenbach, on the other hand, 'Stimmung' is a means of discussing the presence behind aesthetic experience, one that is "dependent on [...] the shared semiotic system it is based upon, aesthetic modes and genre conventions and established art forms".¹⁸ Breidenbach makes use of a phenomenological approach to 'Stimmung', which splits its application into four levels, namely that of character-world relations in a literary text, reader-text relations and the attunement between them – an approach that conceives of generic and literary conventions as emergent from 'Stimmungen' – and lastly a 'Stimmung' of a given age.¹⁹

The two authors' common cause is found most explicitly in their shared interest in the relationship that generic conventions have with 'Stimmung'. One approach, seminal in particular to Gothic and Horror Studies, that of Alastair Fowler in his work on genre and modes, finds common cause with this work on 'Stimmung'. When Fowler identifies different characteristics of the kinds of literature, he argues, rather succinctly, that "[e]ach kind has an emotional coloration, which may be called 'mood', [...] plays a specially vital part in gothic romance, where it often colors character, atmosphere, and natural description in an unmistakable way".²⁰ It is evident from the way he engages with mood that this is situated as part of a broader relationship to a text's location spatially as it "can be associated with local indicators of genre"²¹ but also temporally, as Fowler's examples are situated and reserved to specific time periods.

In the context of this article, my approach is specifically oriented toward one of the conventions of the slasher-horror novella. As the term 'slasher' highlights, violence is the nexus of the genre, which is known for its over-the-top representations of violence as much as its particular penchant for humor, absurdity and misogynistic inclinations. Readerly attunement to the slasher-horror text involves the normalization of violence. By normalizing violence through repetitive action, it takes on its own rhythm and becomes form itself. These contours operate on different spatial and temporal scales and levels, notably through their engagement with different forms and cycles of violence which are noticeably inflected with specific temporal and spatial thrusts.

Since that intra-textual normalization extends beyond the confines of extra-textual reality, transmitting expectation to the reader, it allows for more acute juxtapositions, tension points, and resonances between actual acts of violence and their horrific, non-mimetic counterparts.

17 Jonathan Flatley: *Reading for Mood*, p. 150.

18 Birgit Breidenbach: *Aesthetic and Philosophical Reflections on Mood*, pp. 28 f.

19 See *ibid.*, p. 29.

20 Alastair Fowler: *Kinds of Literature*, p. 67.

21 *Ibid.*

Violence in 'The Roo'

Violence functions as a generative and structuring principle to 'The Roo', which bumps up its status from mere content element to one that functions on a formal level. As a result, the interwoven poetics of violence as content and violence as form inflect 'The Roo' with vibes akin to those of the filmic genre and the cinematic pulp novels that it responds to by drawing on those genre traditions.

In this article, I explore three contours of violence in 'The Roo'. Firstly, I examine its relation to the broader traditions of horror and to slasher fiction more particularly. Thereafter, I elaborate on violence as it intersects with Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of the concept in relation to Lacanian understandings of the master-signifier, which entails what Žižek calls performative efficiency. 'The Roo' makes explicit, through its reliance on Australian tropes of danger and animal horror, how words can be transformed to better accommodate violence. Third and lastly, I consider slow violence within the text in two forms: domestic abuse and rural dispossession, which yield readings that suggest scales of violence far less instant and visceral than that typical of slasher fiction.

In 'The Roo', graphic violence emerges within the first chapter. Accordingly, the novella establishes itself as a piece of slasher fiction right from the start. Rather than writing against the grain of such texts, it embraces and holds up its relationship to them, and thus serves as a prototypical example of the ways that violence structures horror-slasher texts. Although 'The Roo' is not a classic slasher-horror, it takes on its character by means of its cover, which features wear marks and even parodies, and pays homage to the American pulp publisher Zebra books by mentioning ZEBAR books on the cover margin. This is of course intentional, since the initial cover (which differs significantly from the actual, published cover, save for the depiction of a massive kangaroo) was discussed by Charles R. Rutledge as giving off an impression "like something Zebra Books would have published back in the day",²² and already invites readers into the complex spatial-temporal situation of the novella. The cover emulates earlier trade paperback covers that were common in the 1970s and 80s, perhaps not coincidentally the prime era for slasher-horror films, and the intentionally worn look adds to that impression. As this paratextual frame suggests, the novella embraces its pulpy roots, featuring an assemblage of popular tropes that fit into the slasher-horror genre, although with some notable changes.

The generic structure of 'The Roo' is dependent on violence precisely because slasher-horror genre history creates a generic requirement for the rhythmic annihilation of the majority of its cast. Part of the fun of 'The Roo' and in fact of horror in general is rooted in its cycle of familiar repetition,²³ which is here figured as the futile efforts of masculine forms of violence employed against the killer Kangaroo. The violent cycles regularly unleashed by horror at large can be witnessed on both micro- and macro levels in slasher works. In fact, an increased amount of violence is to be expected, and also misogynistic gender power structures, sup-

22 Alan Baxter: *The Roo*, p. 7.

23 Darryl Jones: *Horror*, p. 13; Andrew Tudor: *Why Horror*, p. 459.

ported by the poetics of the text – what some critics call ‘torture porn’. However, ‘The Roo’ does not feature the ‘Final Girl’, a trope in which a woman, often a young one, survives the events of horror depicted in a slasher text,²⁴ nor does it victimize women in particular. This generic departure seems to imply that ‘The Roo’ is not necessarily a slasher, but more similar to the flavor of a slasher remake.

In Ryan Lizardi’s work on exploring hegemonic power and misogyny in early twenty-first century slasher remakes, he concludes that they “have expanded on two themes of the original; the reaffirmation of the hegemonic normality and ‘Othering’ of the abnormal and the related theme of misogynistic torture that, coupled with the first theme, become all the more destructive to progressive cultural power structures”.²⁵ On the micro level, we see repeated gruesome deaths at the hands of the central monster or threat, a transgressive Other, sometimes in ways that might be described as torturous. On the macro level, readers face a monster that “always escapes”²⁶ to return another day. In so doing, the monster’s violence exceeds the narrative in its expectation, as is typical of the genre. The kind of violence that is inflicted by and which might be used to drive away monsters is thus normally universalized, unconditionally accepted as a part of restoring order to the disrupted horror text. ‘The Roo’ seems to confirm this expectation at first, as the climax builds toward the men of the village gathering together with weapons in an attempt to hunt down the monstrous kangaroo.

Yet, violence is here elemental in its construction, a generic facet that cannot be overlooked as mere content but rather should be considered as to how it might bolster the form of the novella. Each ‘dead end’ in the narrative – each scene that results in the death of its central perspective – ruptures any sense of futurity, while also demanding a materially delayed closure, which is evident from the fact that there remain pages to consume. By forcing the reader to frequently confront violence, violence which is at first unexpected in its volume and detail, it becomes a habit and rhythm. Over time it is anticipated – perhaps feared or enjoyed – and invites an attunement to a suspension of disbelief to the raw impossibility of the violence of the text, approaching and perhaps adhering to parody. As a pseudo-remake, ‘The Roo’ locates itself temporally within the tradition of slasher-horror fiction and relies on said tradition’s rhythms to both upset and conform to its standards. In doing so, ‘The Roo’ activates attunement, speaking to earlier slasher-horror fiction, trivializing its violence yet also rendering it ineffective. The ‘Stimmung’ arises from its various deployments of violence since it juxtaposes different violent cycles against one another, which is apparent upon further analysis and from cultural context, specifically by drawing on the violent undercurrents of Australian horror fiction.

It is almost a given when considering Australian horror or the gothic, but also postcolonial studies at large, that horror is inescapably linked in some sense to a colonial past. This is perhaps why Australia is home to the contentious yet separate and distinct Australian and Aboriginal Gothics,²⁷ which engage with

24 See Carol J. Clover: *Her Body, Himself*, pp. 201-221, for an elaboration of the trope.

25 Ryan Lizardi: “Re-Imagining” *Hegemony and Misogyny*, p. 120.

26 Jeffrey J. Cohen: *Monster Culture*, p. 44.

27 For an overview of the Aboriginal Gothic, see Katrin Althans: *Darkness Subverted*.

Australia's colonial legacy and its ongoing ramifications. In this context, naming in particular carries great weight as an exercise of power that unfolds lasting impacts on discourse and the individuals engaged within or described by them. Regarding Australian horror, in which "*terra australis* balancing the northern hemisphere [...] was banished to the margins of the *mappae mundi*"²⁸ by map-makers, it is evident that this has influenced European portrayals of Australia since it was termed Europe's Other by means of naming and mapping. The legal fiction of 'terra nullius' too has received attention for the part it plays in depictions of Australia's haunting landscape.²⁹ A range of exhaustive work has gone into the imperial project's desire to categorize and control – to name and to use 'education' to express colonial power and influence.³⁰ Frequently, horror narratives carry with them connections to Australia's past, in particular the colonial violences and stolen generations, as well as the concomitant haunting in their aftermath. Far too frequently, acts of discourse have informed and justified these real-world horrors, only to find representation in textual works.

To expand on that point, a discursive act, i.e., naming, according to Slavoj Žižek's reading of Lacan's concept of the master-signifier, is an act of violence. Master-signifiers are signifiers that do not point outward, but rather to themselves. Hence they are dependent on their own frame and reference themselves. Žižek claims that master-signifiers are part and parcel to the reductive tendency to weaponize language. To produce one is an act of discursive violence since the process of asserting them is violent and they are argued to uphold specific discourse fields, which, in their own self-referentiality, are imbricated in power relations. As he argues,

[h]uman communication in its most basic, constitutive dimension does not involve a space of egalitarian intersubjectivity. It is not 'balanced'. It does not put the participants in symmetric mutually responsible positions where they all have to follow the same rules and justify their claims with reasons.³¹

The imposition of a master-signifier's linguistic standard, a 'because I said so' is, effectively, the highest order of violence. This is not to say that all linguistic standards *are* themselves violent, but rather that master-signifiers are asserted in a violent act. If the root of a master-signifier is traced, for instance, by an etymological history in a prescriptivist approach or in an observational descriptive approach to language, both ultimately are rooted in authority and normalization, but also the violent process of separation – a severance from material reality and imposition within a language system. Eventually language *is* imposed by cultural systems, which, though malleable, carry their own violent undercurrents. As a result, we should remain skeptical of language, particularly of master-signifiers, and their relation to violence. There is, to that end, one area where Žižek's reading holds

28 Ibid., p. 14.

29 For a detailed elaboration on how 'terra nullius' intersects with haunting in another context, see Robert Clarke: *Travel Writing from Black Australia* (specifically the chapter *Dark Places*, pp. 138-166).

30 See Edward W. Said: *Orientalism*; Homi Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*; Bill Ashcroft et al.: *The Emperor Writes Back* for an introduction to post-colonial studies as it engages with these concerns.

31 Slavoj Žižek: *Violence*, p. 53.

particular currency for contemporary approaches to violence. To elaborate his understanding of the danger of the violence of language, Žižek highlights how racist discursive acts, for instance, enforce themselves by defining specific people as inferior and then treating them as such. Discursive acts thus carry greater weight than might be assumed since these master-signifiers are weaponized to marginalize. Their targets, thus, are not Other but othered, not inferior but inferiorized. What emerges is a “performative efficiency”;³² a performed interpretation of an imposed master-signifier that unleashes devastating consequences.

In ‘The Roo’, performative efficiency emerges in large part due to its use of naming as a discursive act. Naming is introduced from the outset by the invocation of the non-standard form of kangaroo and the narrative construction of the roo as a monstrous threat. For readers outside of Australia (and this is important since ‘The Roo’ definitely targets an international market), the use of the term ‘roo’ is also far from common. The kangaroo is already made Other by the shortening of its name, shifting the kangaroo as animal to the roo as something more or perhaps less than a kangaroo. So too can roo be utilized derogatorily, as a means of infantilizing or degradation. As a result, the word displaces and alters the kangaroo, which is only further bolstered by the massive, red-eyed figure on the cover. What occurs, then, is an imposition of a master-signifier, to be supported by the poetics of the text. The uncanny term roo is given primacy for readerships outside of Australia and only can refer back to itself. By this imposition, the animal is defamiliarized and made into a not-kangaroo threat, one that must be put down, brought under control, etc. The use of language to create a sense of anxiety and border-crossing is a neat parallel to Cohen’s idea of monsters as registers of cultural anxieties that need control to be exercised over them,³³ which is perhaps why many monsters depend on naming as self-reference.

Performative efficiency is encapsulated in the white villagers’ attempt to cast blame onto the minority Aboriginal population. Billie Catter, an abuser and a source of violence – whose own domestic abuse motivates the revenge that triggers the mayhem in the narrative – intervenes verbally to direct and deflect responsibility onto the local Aboriginal population. Akin to colonial acts of violent justification, Catter peruses performative efficiency to assign blame to Aboriginal Australians, thereby creating targets for violence. By suggesting that the violence stems from them, Catter strives to draw lines between Aboriginal and White Australians. Fortunately, however, Catter is quickly dismissed by the subaltern who *does* speak. “Mawber laughed, ‘Fire for eyes, sharp teeth, indiscriminate murder? Sound like whitefella business, you ask me [...] Mate, have you read your people’s fucken bible?’”³⁴ While Catter is unable to re-impose and re-define Aboriginal Australians as violent people, his effort surely qualifies as an attempt to do just that, if only to justify further acts of violence.

Later on, the language use as a form of violence is revealed to be the reason for the rampage, which was meant to only target Pauline’s abusive husband, the aforementioned Bill. In order to exact her revenge, Pauline made use of the book

32 Ibid., p. 62.

33 See Jeffrey J. Cohen: *Monster Culture*, pp. 49-52.

34 Alan Baxter: *The Roo*, pp. 70 f.

written on (possibly) human flesh to invite otherworldly, seemingly demonic, power into the corpse of a kangaroo that she found. The text here is linguistic violence given substance, a material manifestation and representation of text inflected with violence in its own production, but also in its 'reading'. In spite of the fact that Pauline's ritual is not detailed in the novella, it does connect to summoning rituals and notions of demonic naming, going as far as requiring sacrifice in order to activate the book's magical properties. Although she can summon the avenging kangaroo ritualistically by a speech act, Pauline is unable to decipher the instructions to control it since she lacks the relevant language knowledge:³⁵ Her efforts to name her husband as its target are misunderstood, and the kangaroo kills and brings victims to her in an effort to appease her. Monstrosity emerges here from ignorance, from a lack of understanding and an attempt to name or control through language – an effort to establish performative efficiency. In this case, the imposition of a master-signifier depends on Pauline's challenge to assert control with language while lacking referentiality. Though such a form of control may apply in human-human relations, it falls apart in its articulation to the monster. Violence, the defining feature of slasher-horror, is thus reduced to a vulgar and ignorant approach, one that reveals the weaknesses of such violence.

Returning to the violence that is cultivated by the transformation of the kangaroo to the monstrous roo, animal horror scholars have considered the human element to be the key determinant in animal horror tales. Bernice Murphy writes:

What remains constant is that the ways in which animals interact with humans (and vice versa) in horror fiction tells us about ourselves and about the ways in which we interact with the non-human intelligences whose presence, in one way or another, we must contend with every single day of our lives.³⁶

It is the human element, the ways in which animals and humans interact, that allow not an elucidation of the animals, but rather that of the human subjects that must contend with animals in their lives. After all, the titular roo as monster only emerges as inspiration for the novella as a creature that terrorized human gardens. It thus evolves from a natural creature that upsets a human order, i. e., normative codes and expectations, into a threat to be met with possible destruction, as the news story indicates that police have been mobilized to track it.³⁷ Although far graver in its implications, the humans in 'The Roo' must also grapple with a threatening kangaroo. The monster is a form of embodied horror, even from its emergence as a destroyer of an imposed human order. It is aptly suited to disrupt anthropocentric society due to the kangaroo's status as an animal-monster, but also due to the performative efficiency I have shown to be on display.

The transformation of the kangaroo by means of various discourses is further buoyed by the animal's near-iconic cultural status. According to Catherine Simpson, Australian creatures are deeply implicated in nationalist identities, as they are privileged into a 'native' status which calls for their preservation and the extermination of outside others.³⁸ While Simpson argues that eco-horror

35 Ibid., pp. 112 f.

36 Bernice Murphy: *They Have Risen Once. They May Rise Again*, p. 271.

37 Tom Wood: *Australian Town Terrorised*, n. p.

38 See Catherine Simpson: *Australian Eco-horror and Gaia's Revenge*, pp. 45 f.

in which animals are rendered agents points toward the “existence and agency of a ‘more-than-human-world’”,³⁹ in ‘The Roo’, animal horror is still evidently human-centric, as I have established. In fact, the novella’s horror is itself non-mimetic because of the denial of animals as agents to begin with. Although its human characters are presented in often flat or marginalized ways, with no single narrative voice dictating its story, the narrative spends little to no time on the agency of the kangaroo, which is driven by a magical ritual, rather than the kangaroo’s own purpose. The ritual, in turn, is triggered by a human cause (domestic abuse) and manipulated by (misused) human language.

The kangaroo is transformed throughout the text by its status as a monster, which first needs to be established and shifted. It is worth mentioning that this is both a generic requirement but also necessary for the characters to confront the threat to their natural order. First, the kangaroo is hunted by the men of the village in an exercise of physical masculine violence. It is only the animal’s status shift to that of a monster and the empathetic search for Pauline that showcases how the violence capable of exerting control is tied to ‘language’ – all the more since language summoned the kangaroo initially and misunderstood language caused its rampage. This transformative process, whereby the status of the kangaroo is elevated to monster, indicates a necessary dramatic slippage characteristic of horror of the non-cosmic variety.

The third and last layer of violence, in addition to the generic violence of slasher-horror fiction and language’s role in violence, that I would like to draw attention to is Rob Nixon’s concept of slow violence. The concept engages with violent forms that are enacted over long and slow-paced scales that are not measurable within a human lifetime. In ecocritical contexts, slow violence is often mobilized as a means of describing

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all [...] a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.⁴⁰

The relation between ‘The Roo’ and Nixon’s slow violence may at first seem to be negligible. I have elaborated on the interplay between the novella’s surface-level pleasurable or horrific violence as it relates to generic conventions and the treatment of the kangaroo in ‘The Roo’, and these instances of surface-violence seem to be more immediate, even if the animal-horror narrative might at least resonate with the term slow violence’s connection to ecocritical readings. Yet upon closer examination, there are also indications of anxieties that relate to such slow violences, brought to light by the novella’s engagement with domestic violence.

The rhythm of horror-slasher violence initially touched upon in this article allows us to consider different cycles of violence alongside one another by foregrounding individual ones narratively. Since the root cause of the killer kangaroo is an attempt to take revenge on an abusive husband, domestic violence is quite literally the cause of the monstrous rampage. Accordingly, we must

39 Ibid., p. 52.

40 Rob Nixon: *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p. 2.

consider these two forms of violence, horror-slasher violence and domestic violence, with respect to one another. Alongside the horror cycle of the kangaroo's killings, there are various scenes where different focalized characters acknowledge the domestic violence occurring in their own community either in thought or conversation.⁴¹ The familiar repetition of the kangaroo killings is fantastic, but the second cycle, which is often literally called the 'cycle of violence', is anything but. Research⁴² indicates not only how these cycles are difficult to escape, but also how they are often interlinked with greater cycles of financial and emotional struggle, an inability to reach out for help, and shame. The juxtaposition between these competing cycles is a point of disturbance and uncanny harmonization in the text, one that places a burden of shame on the reader, who, by reading, must confront the complicit thoughts that frame and justify abusive cycles, writing them off as common occurrences and seemingly pushing domestic abuse to the background.

There are, then, at least two instances of slow violence to consider in 'The Roo'. First, slow violence enters the picture when it becomes apparent that domestic abuse frequently includes a multigenerational chain of abusers and victims that stretches back and is also expected to continue. Since this form of violence is first placed in the background of the narrative, it manages to infiltrate it and function as an element of worldbuilding rather than stand out as explicitly connected to the horrific events unfolding. Each time it is brought up, characters make terse comments at most and no instances of domestic abuse are described. A scene near the end of the novella stands out since it explicitly addresses domestic abuse, while in other cases it is only mentioned offhandedly. In the scene, three of the women address the abuse, its intergenerational impact, and their missing friend Pauline and her abusive husband Bill. As the women discuss Bill, Sheila notes that she "knew Bill's father and that man was a few sangers short of a picnic too. Rough as a mile of country road, all the Catter men".⁴³ Even here, in the midst of the conversation about domestic violence and the Catter family history, the connection is made implicitly when Sharon, referring back to her husband breaking a cycle of domestic abuse, responds by saying "[i]t's a good reminder to teach our sons to be better than their fathers".⁴⁴ The later revelation of its direct connection to the ongoing rampage showcases the oft-overlooked form of slow violence, tacitly nodding to the failings of masculine violence at every corner of the narrative.

Far from permitting a happy and effortless ending, where the most obvious abuser in the village is killed and domestic abuse ends forever, readers instead are left with Sadie, a minor character, picking up the book which summoned the kangaroo to exact her own future revenge. This is a powerful moment, as Sadie, in that earlier conversation with her friends about domestic abuse, states that her husband "Josh might look like the south end of a north bound camel, but he's a

41 See, e. g., Alan Baxter: *The Roo*, pp. 18, 40, 68.

42 See, e. g., Holly Bell: *Cycles within Cycles*; Ruth Nadelhaft: *Domestic Violence in Literature*; Jess Hill: *See What You Made Me Do*.

43 Alan Baxter: *The Roo*, p. 96.

44 *Ibid.*

good man too".⁴⁵ It certainly could be argued that she is not a victim of abuse, even if she bears a "self-satisfied smile"⁴⁶ when she stows it and walks away. In fact, it's just as easy to read her retrieval of the book as motivated by potential revenge for women in the village since there are "many more living with violence and abuse".⁴⁷ While her motivations are not stated, it is evident that the return of the monster, in this case, is paired to the slow and unspoken violence of domestic abuse.

Secondly, slow violence is always in the backdrop of the novella by virtue of the contemporary issues facing rural villages in Australia. As in other industrialized nations, the rural population has been increasingly displaced by dispossession due to economic woes. Rachel Pain and Caitlin Cahill have identified this form of dispossession as slow violence, which they view as intertwined with and supported by "neoliberalism, racial capitalism and patriarchy",⁴⁸ all of which align to sustain it. The novella further provides evidence of how economic pressures weigh heavily against rural living and livelihoods. "The land out here had a way of breaking people",⁴⁹ Stu Stred, a minor character, notes as he reflects on discovering a farmer that had committed suicide in one of the "pisspot outback town[s]" that he visited,⁵⁰ and goes as far as considering that "[t]he legacy of farming families was dying out like the drought-stricken grass in Country Australia. Big farming conglomerates were taking over, or the industry was simply drying up like an outback creek bed".⁵¹ Another perspective, that of the owner of a local store, Shane Keene, describes life in Morgan Creek as tough "in every way" and points out that "there were plenty of women in town who wouldn't be in town if they could afford to leave".⁵² Although nowhere near as thoroughly thematized as the domestic abuse throughout the novella, the text clearly evinces the decline of rural village life in Australia, caused by the slow economic violence against rural farmers.

Conclusion

'The Roo', by positioning itself as a slasher-horror text, as 'gonzo mayhem', actively normalizes violence for attuning readers. By doing so, it situates the serious issue of domestic abuse alongside the less serious issue of kangaroo rampages. The effect produced by means of juxtaposition is that of disruption. The competing cycles of violence on different temporal scales of the slow violence for abuse and the attacks of the kangaroo – initiated by slasher-horror pacing, and informed by language's capacity for violence – create a fault line for readers. These complicating poetics allow 'The Roo' to join the current of Australian horror films like

45 Ibid., p. 93.

46 Ibid., p. 122.

47 Ibid., p. 94.

48 Rachel Pain, Caitlin Cahill: *Critical Political Geographies*, p. 364.

49 Alan Baxter: *The Roo*, p. 35.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., p. 36.

52 Ibid., p. 25.

'Cargo' (2017) and 'The Babadook' (2014), which yield "a compelling admixture of gore and Gothic, commercialism and nationalism, exploitation and art".⁵³

The novella offers a departure from the slasher-remakes of the early twenty-first century, in that it does not offer what Lizardi notes as conventional, i. e., progressive social power structures which are subverted even though the future is rendered hopeful and progressive.⁵⁴ The novella does not glorify violence but rather presents it in an over-the-top manner in order to trivialize, parody, and normalize it. In doing so, it is able to draw a neat parallel between the slow violences of domestic abuse and rural dispossession since both frequently escape human focus, even while they marginalize in different ways. In 'The Roo', the normalization of domestic abuse in rural communities, a real issue in contemporary Australian life, is brought center stage, highlighted by the violent vibes of the novella, which can be interpreted by an approach that focuses on the 'Stimmung' it produces. To elevate readings for 'Stimmung' to a methodological approach, more firm developments in the studies of attunement, presence and their various inflections are necessary – especially in work on genre and periodization.

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53 Jessica Balanzategui: *The Babadook and the haunted space between high and low genres*, p. 30.

54 See Ryan Lizardi: "Re-Imagining" Hegemony and Misogyny, p. 121.

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