

Reviews

Film:

***The Tracker* (2002) and *Ten Canoes* (2006) directed by Rolf de Heer.**

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Both films take the viewer into the Aboriginal past. *The Tracker* (running time 90 min.) is about the violent racism of the white settlers. Whereas *Ten Canoes* (running time 91 min.) is, at its core, a film adaptation of an Aboriginal dreamtime myth. Both films were directed by Rolf de Heer, who also wrote the screenplays. He was born in the Netherlands but grew up in Australia. He is one of Australia's leading directors and is very interested in Aboriginal issues (www.tencanoes.com.au/tencanoes/info.htm).

In *The Tracker* an Aboriginal man, "The Fugitive" played by Noel Wilton, is accused of being the murderer of a non-indigenous woman; the time is 1922. Therefore white men set out with the help of an Aboriginal tracker in order to arrest the suspect. The group consists of "The Fanatic" (Gary Sweet), "The Follower" (Damon Gameau), "The Veteran" (Grant Page) and "The Tracker" (David Gulpilil).

The Fanatic is a deliriously racist policeman who doesn't hesitate to kill 'Abbos'. The Follower is the assistant to The Fanatic and a trainee. He first follows the orders of The Fanatic, who leads the group. But the Follower has doubts which later on lead to a rebellion. The Veteran is an old farmer and not really interested in the mission. But he behaves as the others expect him to. The Tracker reads the tracks of The Fugitive and the three white men not only in literal terms but also in moral terms.

As the parts were not assigned personal names but character descriptions, it is clear that only what they stand for in this colonial period is important. This is a very good method of transporting the message of the film that this kind of incident happened many times, that many people were involved and that these people had similar attitudes. But the viewer must be aware that this is a generalisation. In this regard the dialogue is used to demonstrate the policy of assimilation and the body of thought behind it. The Fanatic functions as the personification of this thinking.

The film starts with a canvas of an Australian landscape which fades into a real landscape. The merging of painted and real scenes is characteristic for this film. While the viewer can see the paintings he can still hear the sounds that provide information of what is happening at the moment.

Painted landscapes are also characteristic for this historical time. They were in vogue in white Australia. A few years later the first famous Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira (1902-1959) said "I can do the same" and started to paint Australian landscape like white artists such as Battarbee and Gardner did (Jones 1992:98-101).

The Tracker is a cross-border commuter, a traveller between the indigenous and non-indigenous world like the painter Namatjira was in art (compare the title of Jones' article cited above). The film itself is a kind of road movie. The paintings in the film are used for the most brutal scenes, which address one of the main themes of the film: violent racism. The other main theme of the film is the co-existence of two laws in Australia: white law and Aboriginal law. An example is the punishment of The Fugitive by The Tracker, who gets his authorisation from an Aboriginal tribe. They found out that The Fugitive committed a crime, having sex with a woman who is not of his skin group – although that is not the crime for which he was pursued by the Fanatic.

The Tracker was nominated for 17 awards at the annual AFI Ceremony and won 15 in various categories. Included was David Gulpilil for best actor; he won a further three awards (two Australian, one from the Philippines) for his role. Gulpilil is from Maningrida in Arnhem Land. He also played a tracker in *Rabbit*

Proof Fence (2002) and is the storyteller in *Ten Canoes* (www.imdb.com/title/tt0212132/). David Gulpilil is an extraordinary actor who manages to convey a special kind of Aboriginal humour. This distinctive type of humour is given place in both films. In *The Tracker* the humour is used to cope with aggressive racism and in *Ten Canoes* the Aborigines laugh about themselves. They even make faecal jokes. One of the hunters in *Ten Canoes* describes the fart of another hunter in front as “silent, but killing”.

In *Ten Canoes* a storyteller leads us in Aboriginal past and tells us two stories that are linked together. The background story is about a group of men who hunt the magpie geese and forage for their eggs in the swamp. While hunting the leader Minygululu (Peter Minygululu) narrates a Dreamtime myth to his younger unmarried brother Dayindi (Jamie Gulpilil). Dayindi desires for Minygulu’s third and youngest wife a dreamtime myth of their ancestral past. In this myth, which is the main story, we have the same situation as in real life: Ridjimiraril’s (Crusoe Kurrdal) younger unmarried brother Yeeralparil (Jamie Gulpilil) desires Munandijara (Cassandra Malangarri Baker), who is Ridjimiraril’s youngest of three wives.

The background story, which is about the historical past, is shown in black and white, whereas the central story which is about the ancestral past is presented in colour. This is an appropriate instrument so that the viewer can differentiate between the two.

A special feature of *Ten Canoes* is that all actors are amateurs. That gives the film its authenticity. The film works because the myth is narrated as a story which is embedded in another one. It is told to the brother in order to let him find out the wisdom of it. It also works because the viewer can learn something about traditional Aboriginal life, like hunting or how to make a canoe.

Both films function in their specific way and show the viewer parts of Aboriginal past by using a very vivid narration style. They are recommended for anybody interested in Aboriginal Australia.

Bibliography

Jones, Philip 1992. “Namatjira: Traveller between two worlds.” In J. Hardy et al. (eds.), *The Heritage of Namatjira: the Watercolourists of Central Australia*. Australia: William Heinemann Press, p. 97-136.

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