

# Antipodean Dream, Antipodean Nightmare: Spatial Ideology and Justin Kurzel's *Snowtown*

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*You—from elsewhere. You—the antipodes. You—from elsewhere.*  
(Paul Virilio, *Grey Ecology*)

*Since he was not in the grave, I could bear, I thought, to learn that he  
was at the Antipodes.*  
(Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*)

**T**HIS ESSAY BEGINS FROM A SIMPLE PREMISE: DETERMINATIONS OF 'AUSTRALIANNESSE' and 'the Australian character' have been and continue to be inextricably linked to the fetishisation and reification of space in popular cultural manifestations of Australia. This is evident throughout white Australian cultural histories, as well as white histories of Australian culture. Perhaps this is a tautological claim in relation to any conception of nation, tied as such conceptions are to modern practices of cartography and geography. However, it is my contention that whilst notions of space play a determinant role in general vis-à-vis the configuration of nation (and national character), they play a larger role than usual in the configuration of 'Australia'; the function of space in the conception of Australia is less modulated through competing discourses such as class, ethnicity and religion than in other national examples. This emphasis continues to privilege a mythical vision of space, with *terra Australis incognita* reified according to either of two dominant paradigms: the landscape is cultivated as a blank space offering

the egalitarian opportunity for ‘man’ to reassess and reassert ‘his’ place in the natural order; or the landscape is cultivated as a sublime object—grand, and at times terrifying in its vastness and emptiness, a spectral antipodean environment that seems to ‘naturally’ lend itself to the gothic mode.

Indeed, notions of ‘Australianness’, as several cultural critics and historians have noted, are frequently embedded in the generation and interpretation of landscape, be it ‘bush’, ‘outback’, ‘beach’ or ‘desert’. Roslynn Haynes, for example, analyses the function of the desert in Australian cultural, geographic and ecological thought in *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*. Geoffrey Dutton discusses the figure of the beach in the Australian cultural psyche,<sup>1</sup> whilst, more recently, Don Watson has explored the contradictions in depictions of the ‘bush’ in relation to the Australian ‘character’ in *The Bush: Travels in the Heart of Australia*. From Marcus Clarke, C. E. W. Bean and Russell Ward through to Robert Hughes and Bill Gammage, descriptions of ‘Australianness’ have tended to preference spatial rather than historical, political or economic discourses.<sup>2</sup>

The following essay analyses these representations of Australian space in two sections. The first section discusses the spatial fetish in Australian culture in pre- and post-1788 European and Australian perceptions of *terra Australis*, through critical discussion of a selection of literary and cinematic artifacts. I follow a line of thought initially suggested by Ross Gibson in *The Diminishing Paradise* and later re-deployed by Peter Sloterdijk in *In the World Interior of Capital* that imagines cultural discourses about the antipodes and Australia as the product of a profound disappointment regarding the actuality of the Australian experience. In this reading, the terrestrialisation of the antipodean imaginary after invasion and colonisation—whether it be the optimism of the Patersonian bush-idyll, or the negative form signified by the Clarkeian gothic—has generated a diffuse sense of boredom that has lingered in cultural artifacts across multiple media to the present day. At the same time, this fetishisation of space—‘bush’, ‘beach’ or ‘outback’—continues to mystify nineteenth-century history: the massacres of Aborigines, convict abuse, the Squattocracy, and so on.

I then argue in the second section that Justin Kurzel’s recent horror thriller *Snowtown*, along with a handful of other Australian films, deliberately problematises this mythical representation of space in the bush-idyll and the Clarkeian gothic by depicting suburban space as the product of uneven geographical development; in Kurzel’s film, space is gridded to the unproductive suburb, primed for the generation of violent, antisocial behaviour. Kurzel thereby

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hartley and Green.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, these are invariably intertwined and co-dependent, as David Harvey has consistently argued. Any ‘disentanglement’ here is for the express purpose of illustrating a broader tendency, and will thus remain at best approximate.

aestheticises the argument of Gibson and Sloterdijk, demonstrating a socio-spatially-produced boredom with lethal consequences. Through its foregrounding of temporal cinematic effects, the film fetishises time and, in the context of its depiction of suburban marginality, reminds the viewer of the temporal dimension of political struggle as both unleashed through the unevenly urbanising forces of capital (Harvey 146-50) and repressed in the dominant depictions of space as either idyll or spectral landscape. *Snowtown* is thus a rare film in the Australian archive, suggesting Australia's spatial mythos obfuscates class exploitation, thereby challenging the myth of egalitarianism (linked to a perception of *terra nullius*, unbounded continental space) that continues to define much popular Australian discourse.

It should be noted that the following discussion of 'space' and 'spatiality' pivots around conflicting modes of geography. The first—let us call it the colonial mode—is still (arguably) the dominant way of imagining Australian 'space'. It sees space reified for 'development', as cadastral, as the basis (and bastion) of private property. The second—let us call it the critical mode—is the vision of Australian space privileged by *Snowtown* that develops along a similar critical trajectory as the spatial theory of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Edward Soja. This sees 'space' in terms of its production and distribution of inequality (and, by extension, criminality). Political action is, thus, always embedded in the production of space (and the representations of this production). The colonial-contemporary vision of the landscape as the reflection of the mythical-'natural' is thus contrasted with the critical-modern vision of the landscape as the product of socio-cultural relations.

### **I. No More Sea Monsters: Disappointment and Boredom at the End of *Terra Australis***

Australian horror cinema, continuing the gothic literary tradition outlined by Gerry Turcotte (1998), frequently depicts the Australian landscape as a spectral and macabre space, generating a population of murderers, idiots, and cannibals.<sup>3</sup> Russell Mulcahy's *Razorback*, for example, epitomises this tradition. The film features a pair of fraternal murderers and rapists, the Baker brothers, whose depraved actions are depicted in symbiosis with the harsh Australian landscape as seen through the eyes of protagonist Carl Winters (Gregory Harrison). Carl is a polite, urbane Canadian-New Yorker who arrives in Australia to track down his missing wife Beth (Judy Morris). Outback NSW, alternately moon-drenched and sunburnt, ripped straight from Russell Drysdale's *Sofala*, is, clearly 'not a place for wimps'<sup>4</sup>—or for cultured and conscientious Americans. Note Vincent Canby's description of the scenery in his review in *The New York Times*:

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<sup>3</sup>For more detailed discussion of the history of the horror genre in Australia, see Ryan, 'A Dark New World' and Ryan 'Australian Cinema's Dark Sun'.

<sup>4</sup> To quote the sign outside the Ned Kelly Museum in Glenrowan: 'This is not a place for wimps'.

the landscapes of *Razorback* ... have a wonderfully bizarre, almost Daliesque character. This is a place where the full moon never wanes and where it's not at all odd to see the chassis of an abandoned automobile in the topmost branches of a dead tree. ... The scenery is far more scary than the monster hog.

Backward, bestial Australia is clearly constructed, from the beginning of the film, in relation to the cosmopolitan sensibility of king of the modern city, New York.

Tom O'Regan discusses this figure, the 'American in Australia', as 'constant ... in the local cinema' (52), referring to Richard Franklin's *Roadgames* and George Miller's *Gross Misconduct* in addition to *Razorback*. 'Americans', O'Regan writes, 'are often "problematic" figures and presences which Australians need to negotiate and come to terms with—often making the Australians feel inferior' (52). This split between civilised American and barbaric Australian reflects a broader urban:rural dialectic in the Australian imaginary, and *Razorback* maps this split between city and country onto an international scale.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, contrasting with the sub/urban focus of many American incarnations of the genre,<sup>6</sup> few Australian horror films occur in an urban environment—almost all are set either wholly in the bush or outback, or in liminal country towns hovering precariously on the verge of un-civilisation.<sup>7</sup> More recently, this tradition is continued in films such as *Wolf Creek*, *Rogue*, *Gone*, *Van Diemen's Land*, *The Undead*, and *The Loved Ones*, amongst others.<sup>8</sup>

This embodiment of a bush mythical and menacing—often in direct symbiosis with a violent people—is, of course, a dominant thematic in Australian gothic more generally, and has been a recurrent impulse in depictions of Australia from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first.<sup>9</sup> Australia is described, for example, by popular British novelist J. B. Priestley in *Saturn Over the Water* as 'mixed-up and contradictory, peculiar and mysterious' (170), a 'huge dusty old continent, haunted not by men and their history but only by ghostly gum trees' (171). In the desert of James Vance Marshall's *Walkabout*, 'most of the old rules and the old values seemed strangely meaningless' (46); for Mary and Peter, American children stranded in the outback, the desert appears a 'vast, lonely, and limitless plain that rolled on and on, a flowering wilderness, silent as sleep, motionless as death' (75). Recall, similarly, Marcus Clarke's oft-cited description in the preface to Adam

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<sup>5</sup> Note Soja's discussion of Marx's 'syncretizing and synchronic antagonism between city and countryside, the agglomerative centre and the dissipative periphery' (32).

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, *Halloween*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Saw*. The Southern Gothic tradition in the US (*The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, etc.) is closer to the Australian trend, though for obviously different reasons.

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions include *Dangerous Game*, *Out of the Body*, *The 13th Floor*, and *Innocent Prey*.

<sup>8</sup> See O'Reilly and Vernay.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent literary survey see Turcotte.

Lindsay Gordon's poems, which, according to Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver, 'hyperbolically transform[s] the Australian bush into a monstrous, occulted place' (4). For Clarke, space itself becomes hostile, as though the difficulty of existentially enframing the Australian subject creates a macabre and miasmic ecology—or, rather, its hostility (as in Colin Eggleston's film *Long Weekend*) comfortably facilitates, accommodates, and *necessitates* such spectral and ambient monsters.

Most of the research into Australian gothic and horror has looked at the Australian landscape as a kind of 'anxious space', a liminal zone. Explanations for this anxiety focus around three topoi:

- (1) guilt regarding the genocide of the Australian Aborigines;<sup>10</sup>
- (2) cultural anxiety stemming from the convict origins of white Australia; and,
- (3) a sense of existential alienation, the product of the 'tyranny of distance' (which mirrors—and leads to—the desolation of such an apparently 'empty' and unyielding continent<sup>11</sup>) and a sense of antipodean Otherness.

Though aesthetic impulses are rarely divisible into such a simple, tripartite schema, by far the most dominant thread has been the third—the Clarke-esque envisioning of the land as weird, hostile and unwelcoming, a land of 'sterility and desolation' (Serle 16), from explorers' journal entries through to contemporary cinema (*Wolf Creek*, *The Rover*).

However, virtually contemporaneous with the development of the 'Australian Gothic', as Geoffrey Serle notes, is the emergence of Banjo Paterson, the writers from *The Bulletin* and the Heidelberg painters, which leads to the prominence of the 'optimistic' spatial mode: 'Roberts and Streeton and Paterson emerged to display understanding warmth and affection, and joyful, optimistic patriotism' (18). In his celebratory prose, Serle fails to acknowledge the interdependence of these two threads of the bush mythic—the bush as sublime and the bush as pastoral, the bush-gothic and the bush-idyll.<sup>12</sup> Even if 'the colonial Australian Gothic', in Gelder and Weaver's words, 'gives us a range of vivid, unsettling counter-narratives to the more familiar tales of colonial promise and optimism we are often asked to take for granted' (9), both formulations relate to a mythical vision of the land as superlative in the development of the 'Australian' character;

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<sup>10</sup> Note, for example, Gelder and Weaver: 'The colonial Australian Gothic is intimately tied to the violence of settler life in Australia: colonials killing other colonials, Aboriginal people killing colonials, and colonials killing Aboriginal people' (9).

<sup>11</sup> For a debunking of this myth in ecological terms, see Lynch. See also Gammage.

<sup>12</sup> Hempel develops a fascinating discussion of the etymological basis for this symbiosis in his discussion of the relationship between 'grotto' and 'grotesque'.

both require a profound imaginative investment in a spatiality that fetishises the 'empty' land; indeed, both enframe the Australian experience with an emphasis on the 'natural' rather than the social or cultural dimensions of landscape. Both strains in Australian culture privilege an optic that focuses on landscape in relation to being-in-space rather than being-in-time. Paradoxically, this is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the Australian period film in which the spectacularisation of history frequently coincides with questions regarding the tension between the development of the land and (a perception of) the land's enduring mystic-eternal qualities (epitomised in the exoticisation of indigeneity in *Australia*).

As Alfred Hiatt writes in 'Terra Australis and the Idea of the Antipodes', these twin responses to the Australian experience were deeply embedded in European consciousness long before the 'discovery' of Australia, both as the 'spectral presence of the great southern land' (13) and as a product of scientific inference—it was assumed there must be a *Terra Australis Incognita* in order to balance the land masses of the north (10). Indeed, '[t]he antipodes were necessary for the dominant modes of describing the world in its entirety, but for obvious reasons such a space could be apprehended only by means of reasoning: by hypothesis, but also by imagination' (41). *Terra Australis*, by the mid-seventeenth century, had become a rich source for literary speculation. Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* figures the Southern land as the epitome of decadence and excess; Gabriel de Foigny depicts it as a kind of earthly paradise in *La Terre Australe*; Denis Veiras and Hendrik Smeeks both describe it as a land of Oriental-style reason and mysticism (Hiatt 13-4). The two tendencies, Hiatt argues, are characterised through their opposition: the first imagines *Terra Australis* as a land of fantastical savagery and barbarism; the second envisions it as leading to 'advanced, even superior civilizations encountered by the alienated European' (14). Hiatt emphasises that these two possibilities of representation reflect the twin motivations of the discourse itself:

While to some eyes the shimmering presence of *Terra Australis* promised not only a continuation but an expansion of narratives of European exploration and colonization, a 'third world' ripe for settlement and yet more commerce, to others it also contained a promise of correction and to some extent purgation of the excesses associated with the New World. Simultaneously a learned invention and an incitement to exploration, a goad and a reproach to vanity and ambition ... *Terra Australis* offered a wealth of representational possibilities as it straddled reality and fiction. (15)

Two motifs are dominant in representations of the antipodes: 'the antipodes as retreat or recess; and the antipodes as world turned upside-down' (18). 'The

creative potential of *Terra Australis*', Hiatt writes, 'was as vast as its coastline, and its evocative space prompted some of the most visually striking maps in the history of European cartography' (33). This 'creative potential' remains a guiding force in the continual reimagining of the landscape during and after colonisation. The notion of the antipodes (and, by extension, Australia) as either earthly paradise or land of monsters continues as the dominant white cultural impulse in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries (Hiatt 42), after the maps have been filled in.

Peter Sloterdijk, in his recent study of globalisation, *In the World Interior of Capital: Towards a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*, discusses the affective aftermath of the mapping of global space and the transition from the ancient three-continent conception of the globe to the modern four-continent conception. 'As for the fifth continent', Sloterdijk continues,

the mythical *terra australis*, of which the sixteenth century began to dream as the largest and richest of all earthly spaces, the history of its discovery—by the standards of the initial hopes—was a long history of disappointment and shrinking. It would take centuries for European seafarers and globographers to reduce their Australian phantasms to a natural scale. The Britons acted on this when they turned the failing southern realm into their penal colony; now the 'irredeemable, unwanted excess population of felons' amply produced by England could be more or less permanently 'transported' to a place an optimal distance from the motherland. (42)

The transformation of *Terra Australis*, the 'hypothetical giant continent in the southern hemisphere' (106) once represented on sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century world maps as a space of gigantic monsters—as the incarnation of a kind of magical unknown—into 'Australia', Sloterdijk argues, results in a profound sense of 'disappointment'. The sea monster at the bottom right of the *Typus Orbis Terrarum*, the 1564 map by Abraham Ortelius—or the menagerie of phantasmatic beings spread across Jodocus Hondius' *Terra Australis Incognita* in his map of 1608—become obsolete, erased from the European imagination of futurity (and future cultural and capital investment) characteristic of the globalising mission.

Sloterdijk thus continues the argument first suggested by Ross Gibson in *The Diminishing Paradise: 'The Terra Australis of dreamers' imaginations was a much grander realm than that of later actuality*' (3). 'As the historical experience', Gibson writes, 'gradually put speculation to the test, the southern continent proved elusive and increasingly diminutive while its ideal remained alluring' (3). Indeed, 'Anti-climax followed anti-climax as the peripheries of the known world were

gradually extended' (4). In other words, the transformation of *Terra Australis* into Australia fell disastrously short of medieval and early-modern European imaginative constructions that reached Swiftian proportions. And once the imaginative foil to European global-cartographic thought of the middle ages and early-modern period became clearly demarcated, the overwhelming sense in the European-colonial psyche was one of *profound disappointment* that was in turn followed by *boredom*. There was no longer space on the maps for sea monsters, no possibility of thrilling preternatural entities.

At the same time, Gibson suggests, this disappointment generates an increasing body of fantasy culture regarding the new continent:

On the one hand, people had come to accept that the grandeur of a great south land would amount to appreciably less in actuality than had been anticipated in their imaginations. On the other hand, fantasy prevailed insofar as people still expected wonders to abound in the ever-decreasing ambit in which a south land might exist. (5-6)

Thus, the burgeoning of commercial interests attendant with colonisation necessitated the imbuing of the new land with a sense of uniqueness, a mystique of the original made manifest in one of two forms: either the new land was depicted as fantastic and sublime, populated by all kinds of weird and wonderful creatures, man and animal alike; or the new land was seen as offering the possibility for a more egalitarian-liberal society, a chance for new-world building without the excesses that had become apparent in the old New World. For how else would the burghers and nabobs of Australia's early colonial history have risen to such prominence and wealth, if not through the transformation of 'empty' space into cadastral space? How else to justify such a transformation, but through the mystification of the very space that underpins the colonising process?

Turcotte, Serle and others' embedding of the gothic Australian imaginary in terms of the strange flora and fauna of Australia—an interpretation similarly affirmed by influential art historian Bernard Smith (87 n1)—has certainly become the dominant way of thinking about the white Australian experience. The current essay offers a complementary vision that more adequately accounts for not only the dominance of a mythical, fantastic vision of space in the Australian imagination but also, conversely, the trope of boredom that comes to prominence in much Australian culture and cinema of the twentieth century. Boredom becomes a determinate Australian heroic trait in films ranging from *Alvin Purple* and *The Last of the Knucklemen* to *Two Hands*; this middling ennui similarly lingers in the



background of (and, arguably, fuels) the cultural criticism of figures like Donald Horne, Robin Boyd, and, more recently, McKenzie Wark.<sup>13</sup>

Note, for example, the passivity of Arthur (Terry Camilleri) in *The Cars That Ate Paris*. Arthur, in his inability to disagree with anything—almost like an inverse *Bartleby*—epitomises a kind of pure ennui, a stultifying inertia leading to an absolute inability to act. Arthur represents a thread running through Australian narratives of inert, perennially disappointed (white, male) protagonists, who refuse to ‘make a cut’. Such *actionless* protagonists—the flipside of the Anzac hero, or perhaps a realisation of the Anzac hero’s essential failure—continue to frequent Australian literature and culture. Peter Carey’s heroes float along, inert in Australian space, weightless as though in orbit. Even man of action Max (Mel Gibson) in *Mad Max* fits this category; he is constantly driving, but it always seems to be without direction—Max travels nowhere fast, unable to engage in meaningful socio-spatial interactions. Schoolteacher John Grant in Kenneth Cook’s *Wake in Fright* is similarly subject to a disastrous environment—disaster as separation from the stars and thus from fortune (Blanchot, *Disaster 2*)—that stultifies the possibility of self-determination.

Extending Gibson and Sloterdijks’s thesis, the rhetoric surrounding the discourse of Australian Uniqueness and Originality, propagated to the present day, begins to appear as the product of a shallow boosterism, a nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century drive for tourism and white immigration culminating in Baz Luhrmann’s masterpiece of nationalist propaganda, *Australia*. The sublimity of the landscape, as depicted in films like *Wake in Fright*, *Razorback*, and *Wolf Creek*, appears, then, as a kind of pharmacological antidote to the sense of loss that occurs when the region’s banality becomes visible for all to see: just some bland rocks, some infertile soil, and a lot of mediocre desert. The original accident in the antipodes, it seems, was no fall from Eden, but the discovery that there was nothing exceptional to discover in the first place, culminating in the necessity of erasing the monsters from the pre-discovery maps, and the necessitation, thereby, of creating more and more of the mythical monsters and freaks suggested by O’Regan: the Indigenous population, the flora and fauna, the vast and desolate landscape (93).

In the face of depictions of the ‘extraordinary’ and ‘great’ qualities of spatial Australia, from rock band Icehouse to Tim Flannery,<sup>14</sup> Paul Carter gestures

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Horne, Boyd (*The Great Great Australian Dream*) and Wark.

<sup>14</sup> Flannery, despite his apparent intentions, seems to be swept up in the erotics of great men penetrating space. His romanticist-adventurer sensibility, in its celebration of great, penetrative men, does not recognise (as do Carter, Smith, etc.) the impulse towards narrativisation and fabrication that supports these accounts. Despite his putative critique of his indoctrination regarding the exploits of the explorers, Flannery still cloaks the whole process in a kind of atmosphere of boyish mystery, the ‘subtlety, the excitement and wonder of exploration’ (2). He

towards this initiating ennui in his discussion of the explorers' attempts to invest mediocre terrain with names grandiose, uplifting, and often ironic (69-98). Hiatt similarly notes the disappointment that Europeans felt with the disappearance of *Terra Australis* in the emergence of Australia: 'Its proponents would have been disappointed, and their theories of continental equipoise upset, to have seen "Magellanica" reduced to the size of Australasia as we know it' (37).

The colonising mission was (and continues to be), after all, as Smith suggests, always a matter of technics—the creation of material and ideological worlds over which the European has mastery: 'Christianity and the use of tools: to save pagan man it was also necessary to bring him the benefits of civilization' (95). Thus Governor Phillips describes the colonial mission as the realisation of a kind of *mathesis universalis*: 'But by degrees large spaces are opened, plans are formed, lines marked, and a prospect at least of future regularity is clearly discerned, and is made more striking by the recollection of former confusion' (Smith 96). The historical mission is one of order—when one looks back on the past, one will realise how well ordered is the present-future. Erasmus Darwin's figure of Hope, Smith wryly notes with reference to *The Visit of Hope to Botany Bay*, the dedication to Phillips' *Voyage*, 'is an advocate of municipal progress' (96).

## II – *Snowtown* and the 'Revenge of History'

In response to the fetishised, mythical landscapes of Australian culture, Justin Kurzel's *Snowtown* attempts to reimagine Australian space as historically produced—as the product of space *and* time—and, therefore, inscribed with class.

The film's narrative follows the 'true crime' story of the 'Snowtown Murders' gang and its Messianic leader John Bunting (Daniel Henshall), as seen through the eyes of teenage boy Jamie (Lucas Pittaway). In the opening section of the film, Jamie and his brothers, living in suburban squalor, are sexually abused by their neighbour Jeffrey (Frank Cwiertniak). Jeffrey is the boyfriend of their mother Liz (Louise Harris), and Bunting arrives in her and her children's lives as a kind of counterforce to the sexual 'abnormality' of Jeffrey, appearing as a distinctly 'alpha' male saviour and appeasing Liz's sense of guilt regarding the abuse of her children by almost immediately organising vengeance missions against Jeffrey. Bunting's dislike of paedophiles becomes a premise for his outspoken hatred of homosexuals, and the gang forms to enact murders based (initially) in a perception of abnormal male sexuality. Jamie, at first a horrified onlooker, is progressively swept up into Bunting's homicidal world, and the film ends with him

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still invests Australian exploration with a distinctly mythic, epic grandeur. This affective ambivalence defines Flannery's introduction and selection—the erotics of white exploration of a 'black' continent appears behind Flannery's sentimental-nationalistic discussion and selection.

luring his half-brother Dave (Beau Gosling) to his death in an abandoned bank in Snowtown, South Australia, in which Bunting's gang have been storing the bodies of their victims.

*Snowtown* is sufficiently compelling as a true crime story. Its genius, however, lies in its contestation of the classlessness implied by white Australia's 'spatial dreaming', cadastral visions of space connected to a sense of egalitarian mobility / motility.<sup>15</sup> It does this in three ways.

Firstly, frequent images of movement emphasise the inertia of Jamie and his family, stuck in a suburban 'non-place'. Australian space is presented as facilitating a movement (the Australian pastoral dream) that is wholly *inaccessible* to these characters, socio-economically—socio-spatially—disadvantaged as they are, ciphers of a rigidly classed society. Jamie and his family are completely redacted from the sunny vision of Australian mobility—at a literal level, they seem to lack the ability to move with any significance—linked as it is to class mobility (espoused in the arguments of neoliberal ideologues like Mark Latham that 'there's no such thing as class in Australia'<sup>16</sup>). Secondly, the action of the film is intensely concentrated in the domestic interiors of Jake's house. The framing of action through doorways creates a sense of both intimacy and detachment for the viewer. The film, furthermore, features very few extras, and when we enter the eponymous town at the end of the film, the streets are empty, there are few cars and no people. We see a town space evacuated of the social—a *polis* without a populace. And, finally, the film marks a kind of 'revenge of history', a movement away from a geographic to a historical consciousness, through the film's use of temporal effects and sequences that problematise narrative temporality. In the opening nightmare sequence, for example, the screen becomes a blur of lines of acceleration, and the film is punctuated by uncanny irruptions of accelerated and slow motion effects at disjunctive points within an otherwise naturalistic *mise-en-scène*.

### **Spatial Inertia**

*Snowtown* is replete with images of a dilapidated, grey suburbia. Locked off, wide shots of suburban houses seem to emphasise the characters' inertia. Note, for example, the extreme wide shot near the beginning of the film, in which the boys, led by Bunting, buy ice creams from a Mr. Whippy van in order to vandalise the house of Jeffrey. Grey houses and sky are counterpointed by a green but desolate foreground. The streak of pink of the Mr. Whippy van, running right to left across the flat image, *could* mark a burst of hope, but it is a pink barely discernible. At the

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<sup>15</sup> See Turner for a discussion of movement and the 'Australian dream'.

<sup>16</sup> Latham's essay is anchored around this fundamental assertion.

same time, the two-dimensional horizontality of the image—its flattening (complete reduction, almost) of the z axis—seems to emphasise the inescapability of this environment for these characters.

Coupled with the film's myriad locked-off wide shots are several interior shots that frame space for similar effect, as in, for example, the scene in which Jamie is raped by his brother Troy (Anthony Groves). There is a high frequency of interior shots in which characters are framed through doorways, creating a sense of 'detached intimacy', the viewer becoming a kind of Peeping Tom looking into a clearly demarcated domestic world. This objectification of space, at the same time, implies a lack of agency on the part of the characters.

Several images of motionless characters in full (or close to full) body shots similarly emphasise this sense of domestic stasis and inertia. There is a fundamental stiltedness about the bodies in, for example, the shot, near the beginning of the film, in which the three boys stand in a line outside their house. This 'family-photo' arrangement recalls Jeffrey's nude photographs of the boys, materialising, at the level of the *mise-en-scène*, the *style* of photographer Jeffrey.

These three types of image—the locked off suburban exterior, the interior framing of action through doorways, and the family-photo style of bodies captured in stasis—emphasise the perverse immobility of the domestic situation in which Kurzel's characters find themselves. The suburb, inside and outside, becomes, before the gaze of Adam Arkapaw's camera, an oppressively grey, claustrophobic wasteland.

Furthermore, there are several shots in which the content ironically emphasises the static nature produced by this milieu. Immediately following a shot of Jeffrey, naked, eating in the kitchen (following his sexual encounter with the boys), the film cuts to a shot up through the gnarled branches of a tree as a plane, silhouetted against the grey sky, flies away. This image of motion, the potential for escape through flight, when held against their *impossibility of flight*, highlights the boys' lack of agency in their relationship to Australian space. Several other images throughout the film focus around modes of transport—the film features trains, bicycles, motorcycles, cars and planes—but each of these images further exemplifies the ineffectiveness of transport in offering any genuine means of movement or escape for these characters. There are many roads crossing the Australian landscape, *Snowtown* suggests, but they go *nowhere*.

This thematic of a kind of paradoxically inert motion—of movement without destination and function—is signaled from the opening image of the film, a shot of a limitless landscape speeding by without changing. Jamie's voice describes a nightmare over the top of the image, endowing it with an oppressive quality that

is enhanced by the understated rhythmic thumping of Jed Kurzel's accompanying score. This image of 'nightmare motion'—of the motion accompanying the narration of a nightmare—returns towards the end of the film, when Jamie is driving to the bank vault in which the murders culminate.

The film is thus bookended by two sequences of profound motionlessness, emphasised by the speed with which the landscape moves past the camera in the foreground held in relief to the identity of the landscape in the middle- and backgrounds. We have an image of movement, but across an ill-defined landscape, and, through the sequence's virtual repetition (and its original association with Jamie's nightmare), the whole narrative assumes the form of an inescapable nightmare loop, Sartre's 'no exit' rendered through the claustrophobic limitlessness of the Australian landscape.

The sense of the inertia of the characters is amplified by the lack of spatial specificity in the film. There are no landmarks, none of the action occurs in believably inhabited 'towns'. Indeed, there are very few extras in the film. Most of the film occurs in intimate domestic spaces—around the dinner table, in bedrooms, and in the bathroom—and these spaces are located in a landscape that is empty, seemingly without people. The apparent limitlessness of the landscape is therefore associated with a sense of the containment, claustrophobia and inertia of the suburban in the film. Images of a vast land, contrasted with explicit close ups of domestic waste, ironically signify movement for characters hamstrung by inertia. When the gang drives into the town for the final section of the film—the 'Snowtown' that lends the film its title—*there are no people, and no traffic*. There is, virtually, *no town* in a film named for a town. The film is set in the Adelaide suburbs but, given the conspicuous lack of geographical markers, this could, in fact, be any destitute Australian suburb. The film visually presents a space without demarcation, *sans* landmarks and points of interest, the historically laden locations that transform space into place.

### **The Fetishisation of Time**

At the same time, at the level of the narrative itself, the film draws attention to its construction of time, and, in doing so, shifts away from the fetishisation of mythical space in Australian culture, as discussed above. In *Razorback*, for example, everything is over-determined in terms of the landscape—a mythical landscape outside of time. In *Snowtown*, in contrast, the temporal is examined *in relation to* the spatial, and a kind of 'atopia' is materialised.

Jamie's opening 'nightmare' sequence, on one hand, draws attention to space as a signifier of the impossibility of meaningful movement within and across it. On the other hand, in these images, space becomes visually unrecognisable—it is

rendered legible only in terms of, through, and as an index of, movement—in other words, in terms of time. Space becomes rendered through the acceleration inscribed into the representations of it, into the moving images, images moving to the point of the disintegration of (perceivable) space.

This interrogation of and focalisation on the temporal is similarly worked through the narrative structure of the film. The narrative occurs as a series of domestic moments pieced together through mediations of events, the acts of killing that are made evident to the viewer through tape recorded voice messages. For a film about a ‘historical’ event—the Snowtown Murders—there are remarkably few ‘events’. The narrative is, rather, interstitial—snapshots of the life around, leading up to, and outside of, the event(s). The exception is the bathtub murder scene, which sutures together the first and second halves of the film, and marks a kind of conceptual Rubicon for Jamie-as-killer.

In addition to the narrative elisions, there are a number of cinematic effects that also explicitly draw the viewer’s attention to the passing of time. Following the playback of the tape-message that signifies the first murder, the camera lingers on the faces of both Rob (Aaron Viergever) and Bunting, moving into extreme fast-forward as they stare into camera, metamorphosing into twitching organisms under the blue light. They seem to become subjects of a nature documentary, the product of stop-start photography demonstrating the lapsing of time for a particular organism—the unfolding of a flower, perhaps, or the uterine development of a foetus.

At the same time, the *verité*-style becomes suspended at several points, as the characters become swept up in a kind of slow-motion ecstasy, the banal and the horrific alike imbued with a sense of the sublime through both the slow-motion effect itself, but, more significantly, its rhythm in relation to the standard temporality of the rest of the film. Liz and Bunting dance together, for example, at the club, as Jamie looks on, smiling. The extradiegetic sound—a hypnotic electronic melody and rhythm—endows the images, shot like much of the film through a blue filter, with a disjunctive quality. There is something profoundly uncanny about this sequence, as though the film comes alive for a minute, caught up in some kind of ritualistic jig. This temporal (and affective) disjunction reaches its culmination in the final slow-motion sequence, Jamie leading his half-brother Dave into the vault, and then closing the door of the vault and shutting out the viewer (and the film). In sync with the flickering light and crescendoing score, he reduces the screen to a pinpoint of light before it goes black.

These temporal effects—slow motion and forward acceleration—are, of course, quite common in commercial film. However, the screen time given to these, and their positioning in tension with the naturalistic style of most of the film, draws

attention to their status at a level above mere denotation. In its fetishisation of time through these sequences, *Snowtown* throws down the gauntlet not only to the Australian horror tradition but, more generally, to Australian cultural traditions that have privileged a mythical vision of space, outside of social relations, at large. Within the dominant Australian cultural impulse, a mythical, non-critical vision of space is king: time (history, temporality, and the class relations encoded therein, and discussed in class critiques since Marx, and in more recent critical spatial theory) is rendered subordinate to concerns with landscape and the presentation of Australia as 'vast' and 'empty' space, thereby sustaining myths of classlessness. Class, as an index of change through struggle—the teleological emphasis of class struggle as the ultimate abolition of class (Berardi 30)—is both temporally and spatially determined; however, as Edward Soja suggests, history has tended to be privileged over geography in European class discourse and critical theory (21).

*Snowtown's* deconstruction of mythical space—its inscription, in the form of the suburb, of an awareness of class in space—marks a significant intervention into Australian affirmations of landscape, reified, as it so frequently is, in popular Australian culture and discourse. *Snowtown*, then, recalling Rowan Woods' *The Boys* before it, through its critique of the dominant mode of Australian spatiality, moves towards a departure from the landscape-as-fetish, notably, that matches the film's content as an interrogation of the socio-economic conditions that germinate criminality. The suburban, as a marginal, interstitial space ushering in a new mode of politics, has been investigated in several key Australian films pre-dating *Snowtown*—*Don's Party*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*<sup>17</sup>—but these depictions have tended to focus on the politics of the domicile—identity and gender, household divisions of labour, and so on. *Snowtown*—like *The Boys*—implicates the suburban situation in a more explicit focus on politics as class struggle, as the struggle for the distribution of resources and power in the *polis*, with Jamie's anti-social behaviour reflecting his segregation, at the limits of the suburb, from any kind of collective or communal life away from the dinner table. The *non-polis* of the suburban, epitomised by the geography of *Snowtown*, seems to cast these characters onto an *a priori* designated social waste heap—this is perhaps most evident in terms of narrative structure, with the film embedded in a kind of non-time, a temporal loop that negates the teleological Utopia of class struggle. The remainder of enfranchisement and urban democracy seems to be, the film suggests, this sub-urban underclass. Suburban segregation, and its associated economic disadvantage, rife at least since the time of Robin Boyd's

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<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in films like *Don's Party*, political consciousness seems to be limited to the middle class—and to struggles regarding identity. In other words, 'around the kitchen sink'. This is the necessary corollary of the spatial fetish—politics, if it can be shown at all, can only be shown in the home or in spectacular (non)history.

now-classic aesthetic and social critique of suburbanisation, *The Australian Ugliness*, is the Ur-factor underpinning *Snowtown*.<sup>18</sup>

### **Coda: *Snowtown*, Today**

In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja critiques ‘the persistent hegemony of historicism’ (21), the ‘virtual annihilation of space by time in critical social thought and discourse’ (31). ‘The critical hermeneutic’, Soja states, ‘is still enveloped in a temporal master-narrative, in a historical but not yet comparably geographical imagination’ (11). Even if there has been a recent (1988) turn towards the spatial, following the example of Foucault as well as David Harvey’s development of Henri Lefebvre, Soja argues, ‘[s]pace still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical; time as richness, life, dialectic, the revealing context for critical social theorization’ (11). He notes ‘the untroubled reaffirmation of the primacy of history over geography that enveloped both Western Marxism and liberal social science in a virtually sanctified vision of the ever-accumulating past’ (13). Indeed, ‘An already-made geography sets the stage, while the willful making of history dictates the action and defines the story line’ (14).

Soja’s ‘postmodern turn’ is a spatial turn—the privileging of synchronic over diachronic modes of critical thought. But this emphasis on space—Soja’s critical approach to space emphasising the ‘dialectical richness’ of the relationship between space and time—is radically different from (even antithetical to) the vision of space that has dominated Australian culture, and that has always undergirded the mystification of Australian histories of genocide and class struggle. The Australian emphasis on space has always also been a suggestion of emptiness (*terra nullius*), and has thus functioned as a kind of evacuation of historical consciousness, a stretching to *not* engage with genocide and class struggle—consider, for example, the empowerment of squatters through the State-sanctioned primitive accumulation about which Patmore writes<sup>19</sup>—both of which sully the promotion of the ‘Australian dream’. In contrast to Soja’s discussion of historicism in European and US culture, and his suggestion of ‘spatiality’ as enriching discourses around class, I would suggest a mythic-spatialism as the overwhelming frame in Australian culture—a spatialism that functions, first and foremost, in contrast to Soja’s critical spatial theory, as the ideological misericord of history.

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<sup>18</sup> In ironically ‘antipodean’ fashion, this phenomenon in Australia reverses the trajectory of the equivalent segregation of lower and middle classes in many of the major cities in the United States, in which, as Mike Davis convincingly argues vis-à-vis Los Angeles in *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*, the inner city has become a zone for the containment of the poor, and the suburb the site of affluence and the production of wealth.

<sup>19</sup> See Patmore, especially chapter 1, for a discussion of the Australian squattocracy.



Perhaps *Snowtown's* foregrounding of class discourse—in a cultural milieu resistant to history—accounts for media personality Richard Wilkins' disgust regarding the film. Reviewing *Snowtown* for *Today*, Channel Nine's flagship breakfast television programme, Wilkins described it as 'the most disgusting, horrific and degrading film' he had seen.<sup>20</sup> He compared it to a snuff movie, and made it clear that one would have to be deranged to want to see this film. *Snowtown* has one particularly gruesome sequence in which a victim's toenail is removed with pliers, in extreme close up, but, compared to the 'torture porn' horror films that have proliferated over the last decade or so—films, for example, from the *Saw* or *Hostel* series—even this sequence is rather restrained. So why was *Snowtown* so disquieting for Wilkins?

Wilkins perhaps intuits something of the film's mapping of the historical-barbaric (the *Snowtown* murders) over the mythic-cultural (Anzac, Australian mobility) in Australian consciousness—a cartography that reveals an alarming identity. This is explicitly foregrounded in Bunting's dinner table diatribe midway through the film:

It's not fucking mean to kick the shit out of some diseased prick. He fucking deserves it. It's an Australian fucking tradition anyway. Eh? [laughs] We got Anzac Day for Christ's sake. Whole country applauds a bunch of blokes who killed and tortured men, don't they? Why do they do that? Because they fucking deserved it didn't they? See I don't get it. What's the difference between me putting the boot in a fucking pink one and them killing a yellow cunt?

Kurzel's dialogue draws attention to the masculinist psychopathology of that most treasured Australian death cult, Anzac. Bunting's actions—his identification with the Anzac myth—as well as Wilkins' response—seem to equally embody the fraught nature of identification in the modern media age. Identification and identity become confused, as Mark Seltzer notes in *Serial Killers*, in the 'pathological public sphere', a space defined through the symptomatic disappearance of the subject in mass formations and mediatisation—a disappearance (identification with facelessness) that returns in the fantasmatic reassertion of identity through violence.

Australia's version of 'wound culture' revolves around Anzac.<sup>21</sup> Wilkins' disgust, then, perhaps, comes from the film's explicit contestation, interrogation, and problematisation of Anzac and the preferred modes of discourse in which shows

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<sup>20</sup> See Norrie for a discussion of Wilkins' review.

<sup>21</sup> Note Graeme Turner's discussion of the Australian horror-story narrative of brutal failure, 'a failure of human frailty in the face of the Other, a sublime implicated in the landscape, ending in failure and death' (McKee 139-40)

like *Today* reflect on and discuss Australian cultural identity: the jingoism that Russell Ward and Robin Boyd attacked sixty years ago (already part of a rich and nuanced continuum of contestation of the qualities espoused by C. E. W. Bean), the palaver about hard-working farmers, a lucky and classless urban population, and a widespread ethos of egalitarianism—all of which are embedded in a mythical vision of landscape. The less spoken about, but equally prevalent, aspect of this same mythos—‘fair go Australia’, ‘the bush myth’, ‘the Anzac Legend’—is the envisioning of a (happy or not so happy) indigenous population that is equal parts savage-naïve, and mystical-wise, existing in a kind of transcendent metaphysical relationship with the land.

Bernard Smith, discussing colonial perceptions of Tahiti, notes the progressive irruption of death in explorer and missionary descriptions of the landscape and its inhabitants. Perhaps a similar irruption terrifies Wilkins and the viewers of *Today*—a panic about peering too closely from the sunny spatial present into the dark glass of Australian history. *Et in arcadia Richard Wilkins*.

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