

Important background and context to *The Tracker*

Released 2002; directed by Rolf de Heer
(Dutch Australian film director)

Genre

The Tracker is an **art film** (or art house film), which means a serious, experimental and independently made film that is not targeted for mass appeal.

Characteristics of this type of film may include:

- Not adhering to the conventions of realism
- Unpredictable
- Use of symbolism
- Slower pace than a conventional film
- Less dialogue than a conventional film
- Narrative uncertainty/ambiguity
- Exploration of deep, complex themes and meaning
- Lack of closure/resolution
- Use of artistic elements
- Reliance on music and/or camerawork as an important narrative component.

The characters in *The Tracker* are presented as **archetypes** and labelled as such:

- The Veteran
- The Fanatic
- The Tracker
- The Follow
- The Fugitive

Multimodal text

The Tracker can be described as a **multimodal text** as it combines cinematic elements with visual art and music.

Visual Art:

Throughout the film, De Heer provides a number of still shots of **canvas paintings by Peter Coad**, which were specially produced for the film. These are used at key points of the narrative, particularly the violent/disturbing parts.

'The paintings offer a reprieve while alluding to the way these scenes cannot be adequately served by one symbolic register.'

(B. Small, 'The Tracker', Metro Magazine, no.134, p.32) View the sequence of paintings here:
<http://www.petercoadart.com.au/PAGE8.HTML>

Music:

De Heer also uses **long musical interludes** in the film. The lyrics of the songs act as a commentary on what is happening in the film. The lyrics were written by de Heer, the music composed by Graham Tardif and performed by Aboriginal artist Archie Roach.

Setting

1922 'somewhere in Australia'

The film explores the treatment and role of Indigenous Australians in the 1920s, including:

- Massacres of Aboriginal communities
- The role of the police
- The use of Aboriginal representatives as bush trackers
- The varied responses of non-Indigenous Australians to Indigenous people
- The rhetoric used to subjugate and oppress Indigenous Australians.

In 1922, Indigenous Australians were not officially considered citizens of the country or allowed to vote. There was a strong belief that Aboriginal Australians would 'die out' and this is reflected in the eugenicist rhetoric of the time.

Excerpt from *A Short History of Australia* by Thomas Bateson, 1915

The aboriginal Australians declined in numbers after the coming of the whites...they will soon be extinct...So also Australian animals and birds are disappearing before imported sheep, rabbits, sparrow, starlings and the like; and even Australian weeds are being ousted by sturdier ones of European origin. Nothing of old Australia will in the end remain which cannot be shown to be useful or able to fight for its own existence under the new conditions which followed the occupation of the country by civilised men.

The belief in the 'extinction' of Indigenous Australians was underpinned by Darwinist theories of evolution and progress, and formed the rationale for what was to become the Stolen Generation program. We will hear some of these ideas articulated by The Fanatic.

Trackers

The film shows an Aboriginal bush tracker who is being used to assist the police in tracking down an Aboriginal man accused of killing a white woman.

There is a long history of non-Indigenous Australians using Aboriginal trackers to find animals, water, lost children and criminals. In the nineteenth century this was formalised in the Native Police forces. Aboriginal trackers famously assisted in the capture of Ned Kelly in the late nineteenth century.

Aboriginal Tribal Law

The film explores the conflicts between 'white man's law' and 'Aboriginal law'.

We will see the traditional tribal punishment of **spearing**, which involves the victim being speared in the leg by members of his skin group for not following tribal law. This is often referred to as **payback**. Spearing may or may not lead to the death of the guilty person but it is seen as just retribution for the crime committed.

Film's context: 2002

This film was released in 2002, in the middle of what has now come to be known as the 'history wars' – the ongoing debate about the interpretation of Australian colonial and settlement history. In particular, the question of whether there was a deliberate 'genocide' of Aboriginal people came into focus.

In 2002, Keith Windschuttle published his contentious book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume One: Van Diemen's Land 1803-1847*, which argued that there is little evidence of the systematic killing of Aboriginal people, especially in Tasmania. Windschuttle argued that the demise of Aboriginal people in Tasmania was the result of debilitating diseases, and that most warfare was caused by Aboriginal people violently attacking and raiding settler camps.

Windschuttle's views sparked controversy and outrage from other historians, particularly Henry Reynolds, and received much media attention. Historians became increasingly polarised, depending on whether they believed Australia was 'invaded' or 'settled'. Scholars who emphasised invasion became labelled by some (including by the PM John Howard) as 'black armband' historians. Teachers were criticised for imposing a 'black armband'

version of history on students. The history syllabus in schools became increasingly politicised.

Think about

The connections between this socio-political context and de Heer's film. The film depicts unprovoked massacres of Indigenous communities by police members, and points to the complicity of bystanders such as *The Veteran*. It has been called 'the first film to deal directly with the massacres of Aboriginal peoples that occurred on the Australian frontiers' (Small, p.32). What is de Heer's contribution to the history debate?

The politics of 'sorry'

The Tracker explores notions of guilt and retribution. Again, the film's context is vital here.

In 2002, when the film was made, John Howard was at the beginning of his third term of office as Prime Minister. He had repeatedly rejected the call for an official government apology to Aboriginal people.

- 1997 – Release of 'Bringing Them Home' report; John Howard, in his opening remarks to the Australian Reconciliation Convention, spoke out against a public apology for past actions.
- 1998 – First National Sorry Day – a day of sympathy for those impacted by the Stolen Generation; on this day John Howard spoke out publicly against an official apology
- 2000 – 250 000 Australians did the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk for reconciliation whilst 'sorry was written across the sky'
- 2008 – PM Kevin Rudd delivered an official apology to Aboriginal people; John Howard again spoke against this in the media.

Comments on the word 'sorry'

The word 'sorry' [is] not about monetary compensation or damages, nor about today's Australians taking personal responsibility [for past events], but about acknowledging that wrong was done and expressing sorrow about it.

(Final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000)

I have always supported reconciliation but not of the apologetic, shame-laden, guilt-ridden type...There are millions of Australians who will never entertain an apology because they don't believe there is anything to apologise for. They are sorry for past mistreatment but that is different from assuming responsibility for it.

(John Howard, 2007)

I do not believe, as a matter of principle, that one generation can accept responsibility for the acts of an earlier generation.

(John Howard, 2008)

Think about

What this film is suggesting about notions of guilt and complicity, as well as retribution and atonement.

Examining the use of lyrics in *The Tracker*

'Rendered as a series of songs performed by renowned singer Archie Roach, the 'Greek Chorus' in this manifestation has an overt narrative function passing commentary on the action without intruding upon it'

(Linden Jones, 'Ancient Archetypes: The Greek Chorus in *The Tracker's* Songs')

All Men Choose the Path They Walk (establishing scene)

Some men are prone to misadventure

THE FUGITIVE

Questions of guilt aren't always clear
Some men run from a fate they can't avoid
All men choose the path they walk

Some men can be faulted for their reason

THE VETERAN

Feigning to justly intervene
Some men hide from the memories that haunt
All men choose the path they walk

Some men see everything through duty

THE FOLLOWER

Cast off responsibility
Some regret that their courage sometimes fails
All men choose the path they walk

Some men have attitude that's righteous

THE FANATIC

Care not about the consequence
Some men fight with the violence inside
All men choose the path they walk

Some men have reached their destination

THE TRACKER

Finding their own serenity
Some men lead others till they recognise
That all men choose the path they walk

- What does de Heer suggest about each character through the 'Greek Chorus' of the lyrics?
- Why do you think de Heer slows down the viewing experience in this scene through the use of prolonged close up shots and slow motion editing?
- This scene seems to present a variety of conflicting choices that are available to individuals.
- How are we positioned (through the lyrics and visual cues) in relation to these characters' choices? Who is privileged above whom?
- How do the lyrics set up some of the central concerns of the film?

My History (played after the Fanatic's death)

You have taken my country, Fought me, killed me,
exterminated by your hand.

I have lost all my being, Empty, derided,
forsaken in what was my land

And I can never return until there's
contrition And we can all read my history.

I still long for my country, I still remember
the spirit that lives in my land.

But I can only forgive when there is
contrition, And we at last face my history.

And so I will only forgive when there is
contrition, And I can face proud my history.

- Who is the 'I' that is narrating this song?
- How do the lyrics position viewers in relation to the justice/morality of The Fanatic's death? (Consider the emotive language used to describe the violence against indigenous Australians.)
- How do these lyrics relate to the political debates operating at the time of the film's production? Consider the call to 'all read my history' in light of the History Wars, and the desire for 'contrition' in light of the debates around an official government Apology.
- Notice how de Heer symbolises the Aboriginal flag through the shot of the sun rising above the landscape in this scene. How does this contribute to the meaning of The Fanatic's death?

The Follower's Journey

1 The Follower is sent to the frontier to track down an Aboriginal man accused of killing a white woman. **(Key scenes: establishing shots; first campfire scene)**

2 He joins in with The Fanatic to tease and interrogate an Aboriginal tribe, before helping to shoot them to death. **(Key scene: The Massacre)**

3 He is traumatised by the shooting and is devastated. He burns the ukulele he has been travelling with. **(Key scenes: his reaction straight after the massacre; campfire scene burning ukulele)**

4 The Follower doubts The Tracker's honesty. The Tracker shows him how he reads the land to follow the Fugitive's movement. The Follower understands his method and apologises for doubting him. **(Key scene: The Confrontation)**

5 The Follower is torn between obeying The Fanatic and helping The Veteran. At gunpoint, he reluctantly leaves The Veteran to stay with The Fanatic. **(Key Scene: Just after the spearing of the Veteran)**

6 The Veteran is killed, and The Follower buries him and takes his hat to wear. The Follower overhears The Tracker giving absolution to The Veteran. **(Key scene: Morning after The Fanatic**

kills the Veteran)

1 The Follower confronts the Fanatic for killing an Aboriginal tribe. The Follower takes his gun, chains him in the Tracker's chains and leads the group. **(Key scene: The takeover)**

2 The Follower submits to The Tracker's authority when locating the Fugitive. **(Key scenes: Giving The Tracker his rifle; discussing justice for The Fugitive)**

3 The Follower realises that The Tracker was responsible for The Fanatic's death. The Follower allows The Tracker to leave. **(Key scenes: contrast between straight after The Fanatic's death and the end of the film when The Tracker goes to recover the horses)**

Class discussion: After reading the above summary, what conclusions about conflict can we draw from the Follower's journey in The Tracker?

Your task

Working in a group of 2–3, choose one of the above scenes to analyse. You will need to view the scene several times and analyse the representation of the Follower. You should produce typed notes (around 1 page) to present to the class on your scene. Your notes must include specific techniques, ideas about conflict, and screen shots.

Use the following questions will help you to organise your ideas.

1. Where does your scene fit into the sequence of The Follower's journey?
2. What does the audience learn about him at this point? Think about:

What aspect of his character is shown;
His relationship with the other characters
(both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal);
His changing attitudes towards Indigenous people and culture; and
His experience of conflict.

3. What cinematic techniques have been used and how do they shape the audience's perception (understanding) of The Follower and conflict?