

Rolf De Heer (2002)

The Tracker
Feature Film Study
12 ATAR English

Syllabus Learning Intentions:

In your study of the feature film *The Tracker* you will:

Investigate and evaluate the relationships between texts and contexts by:

- undertaking close analysis of texts
- examining how each text relates to a particular context or contexts
- comparing the contexts in which texts are created and received.

Evaluate different perspectives, attitudes and values represented in texts by:

- analysing content, purpose and choice of language
- analysing the use of voice and narrative point of view

Evaluate how texts offer perspectives through:

- the selection of mode, medium, genre and type of text
- the selection of language features that generate empathy or controversy.

Create a range of texts:

- using nuanced language
- synthesising ideas and opinions to develop complex argument
- substantiating and justifying their own responses using textual evidence
- using appropriate quotation and referencing

Why am I viewing this text?

- Rolf de Heer's depiction of a history of oppression and violence in Australia's past is confronting and disturbing. He challenges audience's perceptions and confronts them with an alarming reality about Australia as a nation and Australian society.
- The film provokes thought/ongoing dialogue.
- Emphasises the need for contemporary dialogue and interaction between Indigenous and non-indigenous cultures and customs.
- Become aware of the lack of prominence and visibility in diverse cultural representation; historical 'silence' and cultural forgetting as part of Australian identity is being highlighted, e.g. lack of memorials that commemorate the places and sites where Aboriginal people have been killed by settlers or colonial authorities, and implies that the issue is 'out of sight'.

What is the GENRE of the text?

Within the ATAR English course, genre can be considered in two ways. It can be interpreted as referring to broad categories of texts such as 'feature film' or 'novel'. This is known as the *genre of form and structure*. Genre can also be considered in terms of narrower subcategories, such as dystopia, romance or fantasy fiction - the *genre of subject matter*. This is useful to know, particularly when considering questions of how 'genre' has evolved, transformed, adapted and changed over time and between texts, which is an important part of the syllabus. The manner in which generic conventions have been adhered to, challenged, manipulated or subverted should be the focus of analysis.

Genre of form and structure

- *The Tracker* is a feature film.
- It is an Arthouse film where the focus is on authorial expressiveness.
- It can be considered as a 'reworking' of genre in that de Heer includes unique stylistic approaches to traditional generic conventions in that he incorporates paintings by Peter Coad, music soundtrack by Archie Roach, and representations extracted from historical resources.
- It blends elements from more than one genre; it contains features we would expect of an interpretive text in that it is based on historical events and utilises techniques of foregrounding and selection, omission of detail, and sequencing of information. *The Tracker* is based on historical facts and Rolf de Heer's interpretation of history is presented.

What is the GENRE of your text?

Genre of subject matter

- In terms of genre *The Tracker* can be considered in terms of it being a Revisionist Western, a Bildungsroman text and an Australian Historical Drama.
- *The Tracker* is an **adaptation** of the Western genre. The text's genre reflects **contextual influences** in style and content. *The Tracker* challenges the audiences's expectations of genre by **adapting its features in unconventional ways**, such as the role of The Tracker character as the hero.
- For much of its length, the story recalls the Western in its narrative, its iconography, the characters who enact its conflicts, and its ideology.
- *The Tracker* is an allegorical work. It can be considered as a didactic Australian anti-Western; it deals with race relations between indigenous Australians and European Australians in the 1920s.
- Revisionist films subvert or 'break the rules' of specific genres to critique society and to challenge the mythology associated with that genre. They question the typical narrative of righteous white men's violence, particularly against Native Americans (originally).
- As an Arthouse and Revisionist text *The Tracker* contrasts mainstream films of classical Hollywood cinema. The driving forces are REALISM and AUTHORIAL EXPRESSIVENESS.
- As a Bildungsroman text that presents a masculine world where The Follower comes of age, and Australia as a nation - reconciliation and a nation coming of age.

Context

Context - the environment in which a text is responded to or created. This is often referred to as the context of reception and the context of production.

Context is further defined in the Year 12 English ATAR course syllabus in two closely connected ways:

- Broader influences - the general social, historical and cultural conditions in which a text is responded to and created (context of culture)
- Specific to the text. Situation portrayed in the text or situation in which the text is interpreted - the specific features of its immediate environment (context of situation).

Research the following in relation to *The Tracker*:

- What were some of the likely influences on the creator of the text (Ralph De Heer as filmmaker)? What may have motivated De Heer to create *The Tracker*? Listen to the podcast on De Heer where he speaks explicitly about this.

<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/latest/deep-dive-rolf-de-heer-discusses-tracker>

- What is the likely purpose of the text? What themes, issues or ideas are related to context surrounding the text's creation?
- Who is the probable intended audience of the text? Is this audience different to you? How do the contextual variables affect different audience interpretations?
- What are some of the political, social, cultural, historical and religious influences on the creation of the text and its possible interpretations?
- Does the setting reflect context, as in *The Tracker* which is set in 1922 in the midst of colonial rule in Australia?

Themes

- Contrition
- Reconciliation
- Life and death - value of human life
- Injustice
- Inequity
- Unequal power relationships
- Suffering and oppression
- Abuse of power
- Morality and acts of immorality
- Human nature
- Culture and identity

Key Ideas

- Rolf de Heer as Director is probing the Australian psyche. His premise is that Australia is still a society that displays racism and dialogue needs to continue.
- The conduct of colonials needs to be acknowledged. There is a need to confront past injustices.
- Australia has a history of oppression, violence and colonialism.
- The Indigenous communities are still suffering the effects of Australia's history of oppression, violence and colonisation.
- Human beings have the capacity to behave immorally.
- Not all humans are afforded dignity and it is a struggle for some to obtain this.
- Human relationships are complex and multidimensional.
- Young males go through rite of passage - Coming of Age from a state of Innocence to Awareness.
- Inequality is still a reality today.
- The vulnerability of Indigenous Australians.
- Unequal distribution of power/power relationships can lead to abuse of this power.
- Devastating impact of colonialism on Indigenous Australians' culture and tradition.
- The conduct of the police and their power as an oppressive force.
- There is a need for continued consciousness raising - bringing to the fore a depiction of brutal and horrific violence that has occurred.
- Prevalence of institutionalised racism.
- Marginalisation and silencing of minority/Other.

Issues

- Humanity - disregard for human life.
- History - confronting Australia's brutal past.
- Interpretations of the past.
- The impact of a brutal past on current generations of First Nations People.
- Paternalistic policies set in place by Government and the effects on indigenous communities.

Feature film as narrative

- Feature film (multimodal text).
- Multimodal text (visual and aural medium).
- Feature film is narrative based:
 - Rolf de Heer characterises people in particular ways - think about how the police are depicted vs. how the Indigenous community are depicted. He creates characters as representations of groups and individuals that change.
 - Setting is established - Treacherous landscape (the semi-desert South Australian outback at Arkaroola).
 - Conflict - tension between The Tracker and The Fanatic, and colonial settlers and Indigenous community/people.
 - He also connects to a wider societal conflict - Australia's colonial past and how it might still be having an impact in our present time.
 - Language is used to build up a portrayal of this point in time in Australia's history.
- Filmic codes and conventions are utilised to construct the narrative - cinematography, mise en scene, sound, and editing.

Reading Practices: Reading *The Tracker* as a Postcolonial Text

- Postcolonialism refers to a movement in politics or culture that critiques colonialism, either in general or in relation to a specific colony.
- Postcolonial theory focuses on the ways in which texts represent colonialism, and its impact on indigenous peoples. It examines relationships between race, power, language and identity.
- Postcolonialism critiques canonical texts that downplay the effects of colonialism and/or portray colonised peoples as less fully human than European characters. They challenge the Western notions of superiority and the downplaying of the violence inherent in colonial invasion and rule.
- An important concept in postcolonial criticism is that of the 'Other', a term drawn from philosophy and psychoanalytic theory. In his highly influential text *Orientalism* (1978), Palestinian American critic Edward Said argues that, historically, the literature of the West has portrayed the East as the Other. That is, those in the West are represented as industrial, rational and progressive, while those in the East (a broad term covering the Middle East and Asia) are depicted as lazy, irrational and uncivilised.

The Tracker as a Postcolonial text

- Rolf de Heer 'writes back' to the imperial centre, contesting accepted and official versions of history with alternative perspectives and realities.
- *The Tracker* represents the experiences of colonialism **presenting the point of view of the colonised** and critiquing and challenging the coloniser's perspective.
- Using a postcolonial perspective de Heer deploys the narrow-minded and prejudiced viewpoint of the character The Fanatic in order to question the wisdom and judgement of those who invade and exploit the territories and lives of others.
- Rolf de Heer exposes and challenges the acts of conquest, power, control and means through which colonisation was enacted/achieved - often through horrific and violent means.

Perspective/s

- Post Colonial perspective [Post-Colonialism in Literature: Definition, Theory & Examples - Video & Lesson Transcript | Study.com](#)
- Privileges the perspective of indigenous culture/character. Interestingly the Aboriginal tracker is positioned as the central figure: he speaks the first line and last lines in the text. He does not simply follow orders and is recognised by The Fanatic for his skill and role), but actively drives, directs and controls elements of the film's narrative. He is in control of the story.
- Privileges the perspective of the 'invaded' rather than the 'invader'.
- Privileges impact of past government policies and attitudes.
- Perspective of filmmaker Rolf de Heer in relation to Australia's treatment of Indigenous people.
- Perspective of The Follower.

Representations

- Of First Nations People characters in film - departure from the history of stereotypical representation of Aboriginal characters.
- Indigenous people as passive, compliant and non-violent.
- Australia's colonial past - colonisers are represented as aggressive and violent.
- Representation of colonial violence and the brutality of it.
- The 'Other' - representation of the struggles of people who are oppressed or marginalised by the dominant culture.
- A story of endurance, resilience and survival in a masculine world.
- Representation of culture - spiritual nature and cultural traditions.
- Representation of gender/constructions of masculinity in a male-dominated arena and Bildungsroman; growing up and rite-of-passage in a story that depicts a physical test associated with the environment or initiation into a violent or combative world. The Follower resists this.

Values

‘Values’ can be thought of as principles of significant importance or worth. In the texts we study, values can be explicitly stated but are more often implied; we can’t always clearly detect their presence. This is particularly true when the values being endorsed or supported in a text are the same as ours - they are ‘naturalised’ so that we almost don’t know they’re there. In fact, we tend to empathise and like a character if they share our own values and we generally perceive those with opposing values as antagonists.

In *The Tracker*, consider the values embedded in the text through characterisation. Who are we encouraged to feel sorry for or empathise with and why? Which ones are endorsed?

Which ones are challenged?

Consider De Heer’s implied values...humanity, human rights, environment, spirituality, justice, respect, peace...

The value of _____ is promoted in the text through _____.

Consider each character’s implied values. Consider what each character DOES - this will show what they care about, believe, think and feel.

E.g. what does The Fanatic value? Control, power, authority. How are we as an audience encouraged to reject these?

Attitudes

An attitude is a way of thinking or feeling about certain ideas, people or issues. One way of grasping the concept of attitudes is to think of them as viewpoints or opinions. Attitudes are often expressed clearly through the representation of events and the perspective offered. Attitudes can be revealed in characters': speech, thoughts, actions, body language, facial expressions, dress etc.

POSITIVE: respectful, humanitarian, sincere, caring, sympathetic (The Follower).

NEGATIVE: callous, hostile, cruel, racist, abusive, patronising, condescending, self-righteous (The Fanatic).

The character of ____ displays a _____ attitude.

Rolf De Heer encourages us to be _____.

The text reflects the _____ and _____ attitudes that exist within our Australian society.

The text promotes the attitude that _____.

Narrative viewpoint

Just as narrative fiction has conventions and techniques for representing different points of view - such as first person and third-person narrative perspectives - so too does film. In an **objective point of view**, the audience observes the characters and their world from an external perspective, but does not share a particular character's experiences and feelings. Like an author using an omniscient narrator in a novel a film can use an objective point of view to transport the audience to various locations and show various perspectives on the unfolding action.

In contrast, a **subjective point** of view enables the audiences to experience an event from the perspective of a particular character; i.e. the audience sees and hears what that character would at that moment, and the perspectives of other characters are less apparent. Three techniques that can be used to create a subjective point of view are:

- Voice-over
- Close-ups
- Point-of-view shots

Point of view in *The Tracker*

- *Close-up shots*

Recurring **Close-up shots** of The Tracker's face - how close or distant the camera is from a character influences whether the audience sees and hears the events of the film from their point of view, or from a more external perspective. A close-up shot shows a character's face in fine detail, leading the audience to focus closely on aspects of the character's facial expression (especially their eyes and mouth), and giving the audience more insight into their private thoughts and feeling than the other characters have. The audience is encouraged to share the feelings and viewpoint of this character, especially if there are many such close-ups of one character and few or none of the other characters. This is called *audience positioning*.

- *Point-of-view shots*

In a **point-of-view (POV) shot**, the audience see and hears exactly what a character sees and hears. Taken to its extreme, this techniques gives us the impression we are looking through a character's eyes - as if we are inside that character's head.

Structure

Some very important points about story crafting...

- Consider the opening scene; at what point in the plot does the story begin?
- In medias res (opens in the midst of the plot - in the middle at a crucial point in the action). Exposition is bypassed and filled in gradually. The plot is already in progress and this makes the audience have to catch up. Immediately engages the audience by forcing them to ask questions. What is going on? Why are they in this situation? Backstory and forestory is set up/established. The opening of the film does not explain or develop the background of the characters - each is introduced through a simple, single sentence description. The Tracker is omitted.
- Linear progression
- Chronological
- Plot; cause and effect
- Foreshadowing
- Foregrounding
- Intercutting narrative with paintings. Juxtaposition in shot sequences of scenes - realistic and cutaway to painting
- Narrative is motivated by motivation and thoughts of characters instead of the unfolding of a clear, goal-driven plot
- Consider the closing scene: at what point does the story exit?

Narrative Conventions

Film as NARRATIVE

- Setting
- Characters
- Conflict
- Theme
- Plot (exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, denouement, resolution)

Characters and Characterisation

Characters are Archetypes - they each play an archetypal role.

They are identified not by their proper names but rather by their function in the narrative.

- The Fanatic - relentless, brutal and racist
- The Follower - young and experienced - develops from a stance of disdain towards the abilities of the Aboriginal man to one of respect and tellingly he is the only white man to survive the outback ordeal.
- The Veteran - world-weary with a casual indifference
- The Fugitive - rarely seen.
- The Tracker - proves superior - he toys with his non-plussed and naïve bosses struggling with the harsh surrounding. He knows the land down to each pebble. He effortlessly produces nourishing bush tucker. He evokes a new understanding of justice. Depicted as master of the land. Favourable portrayal of First Nations People (rarely depicted as such in film).

Language and Stylistic Features

- Distinctive visual style and authorial approach of the director Rolf de Heer
- Unique collaboration between artists in different media - filmmaker, painter, musician and recording artist.
- Filmic style is grim and provides a sense of realism - a story of endurance, resilience and survival in a masculine world.
- Point of view shots mimic the human experience of events - as a 'participant'.
- Archie Roach - music storyteller to create mood and to speak for those who are 'silenced'.
- Paintings - not dramatizing the violence by showing explicit violent scenes but drawing pause - get the audience to infer/contemplate/consider what is happening in the confronting scene. Encourages the viewer to look at the death scenes and macabre scenes differently - to ponder and reflect.

Stylistic Features (film language)

- Cinematography (What the camera does)
 - - Camera shot - close up shots and zoom in to The Tracker's face and eyes = contemplation, sadness, extreme long shot and panoramic shots - repeated panning/sweeping shots of the land = frontier and the vastness of the land. Handheld camera creates a sense of realism and audience participation. Compositional elements - foreground/background.
- Editing (post-production) - cuts, dissolves, fades, temporal and special editing, sequence of shots/montage, shot duration = action/chaos
- Mise en scene (what the camera sees) Western genre iconography, setting, lighting, objects, costumes, body language, facial expressions, gaze, symbolism - ukulele, guns, chains, sunrise.
- Sound - there are two forms of sound in film: **diegetic** and **non-diegetic** sound.

Diegetic sound - Characters' voices. Sounds significant to the storyline, such as footsteps or gunshots. Background sounds, such as wind or birds. Music coming from instruments or music devices *in the story*. Non-diegetic sound - plays a significant role in creating the atmosphere and mood within a film. It can include the film soundtrack (music), sound effects for dramatic effect and narrator's commentary

Construction of 'Voice'

The Tracker explores the fanatical white colonials and their effect on Australia's First Nations People in the 1920's in Australia. The film utilises paintings to show the most powerful and destructive scenes and to make them a permanent fixture in our country's history. These paintings echo the saddened voice of The Tracker as he experiences the brutality inflicted on his people. 'The Hanging' depicts multiple Aboriginal people, hanged for no reason, by the colonials. The painting frames them all together and shot duration is 8 seconds. This forces viewers to take in every detail of the destruction of life in this colonial period. So omission of audio is impactful in positioning the audience.

'The Massacre' shows panicked and frenzied eyes of the Aboriginal characters. Close up camera shots of indigenous people's faces, of gaze and body language - downward glance averting eye contact show them as passive, placid and non-combative/peaceful. The silence in the background (omission of sound) emphasises the powerless Tracker as he is forced to watch on. Songs by Archie Roach act as a voice for The Tracker as he is silenced by The Fanatic - 'they're people, people, my people' is the non-diegetic sound - the music soundtrack. The sorrowful, saddened voice of The Tracker is shown through song as his culture is destroyed. Another song overlay is used to depict how Aboriginal people struggle through their mistreatment - 'We are no longer free, we are dispossessed' which shows how colonials took away the Indigenous people's lives and freedoms; this positions the audience to draw correlations between past and present - on what was 'taken'.

KEY SCENES for analysis

- Opening scene
- Massacre
- Campfire
- Mutiny
- Hanging
- Tribal law