THE PROPOSITION

The Outback Landscape and Negative 'Spaces' in Australia's Colonial History

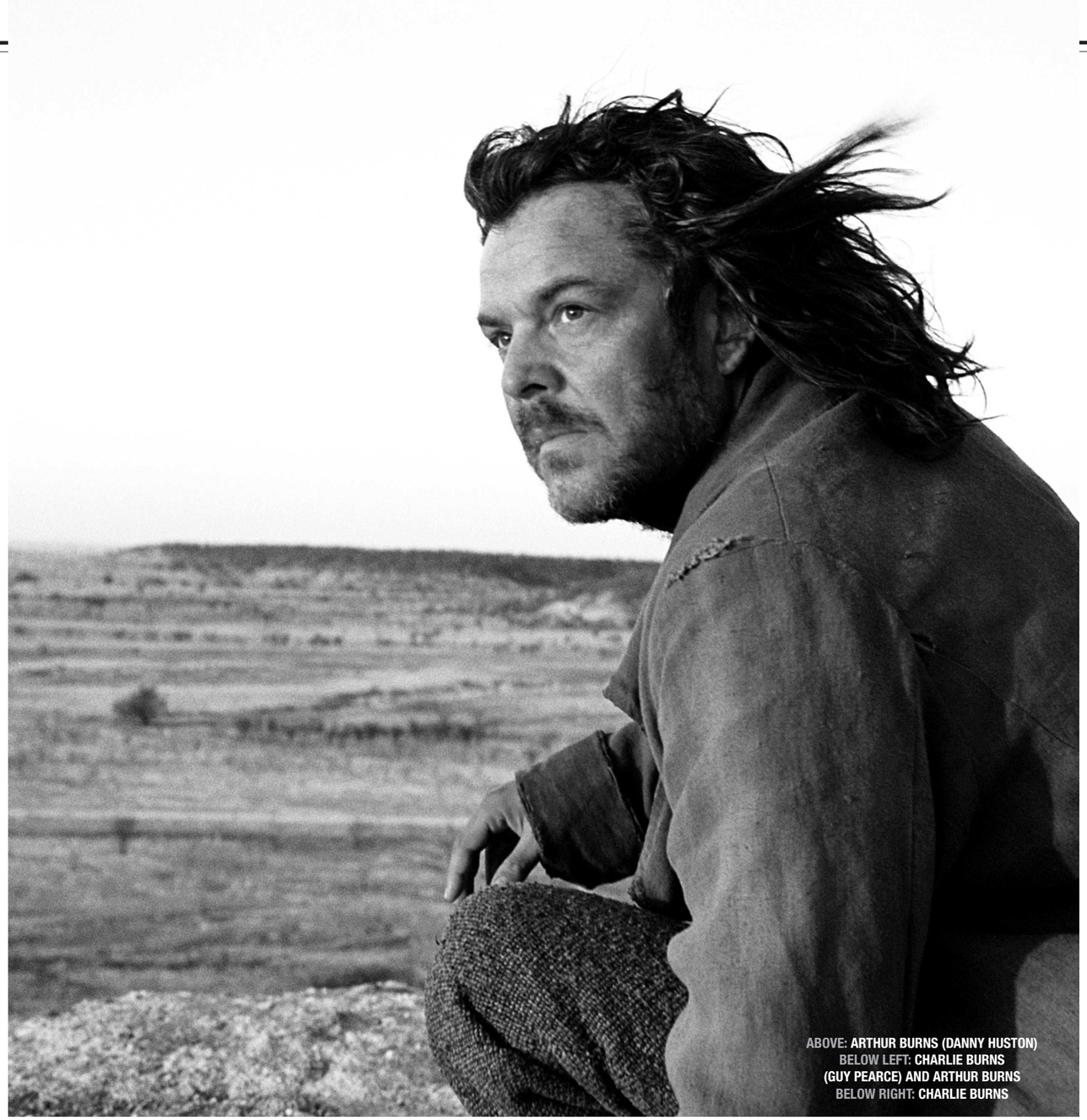
Jane Stadler

THE Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005) depicts the Australian outback landscape and the violence and dispossession that mark the land's colonial history. Following cultural theorist Graeme Turner's assertion in *National Fictions* that 'our view of the country is not created by history in any simple way. Rather, it is produced by the culture's mythologising of its history',[1] this article examines how history and landscape are represented, contested and interpreted in the film and in related narratives about Winton, the remote Queensland location where *The Proposition* was shot. In the process of mythologising history, I argue, 'negative spaces' – understood as awful and unrepresentable events and sites that make their presence felt in cultural texts largely through omissions and contradictions – are as telling as the dramatic film landscapes.

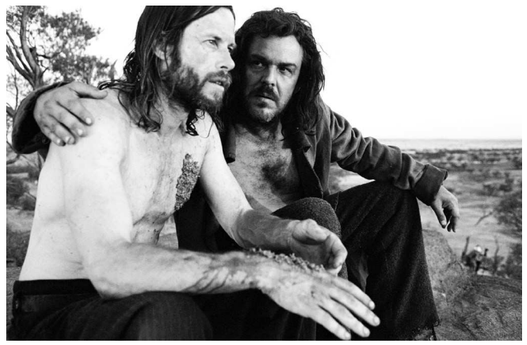
The Proposition conveys 'the mythic force of the rugged Australian landscape and the country's brutal history' in the Australian outback in the 1880s.[2] The film's title refers to a non-negotiable proposition that Captain Stanley (Ray Winstone) puts to Charlie Burns (Guy Pearce) following a rape and murder in the district that Stanley is charged to protect and regulate. Captain Stanley proposes that Charlie kill his own brother Arthur (Danny Huston), leader of the bushranger gang responsible for the atrocity, in order to secure the release of his beloved simple-minded younger brother Mikey (Richard Wilson), or Mikey will be hanged for his involvement in the crime.

The film's lineage includes Westerns and bushranger films dating from a short film shot in Winton called *Bushranging in North Queensland* (Joe Perry, 1904) and *The Story of the Kelly Gang* (Charles Tait, 1906). Bushranger films – including more than eight versions of the Ned Kelly story and six screen adaptations of Rolf Boldrewood's novel *Robbery Under Arms* – contributed to forging the legend of the Australian bush and the tough characters figuring in the nation's harsh past. In Hillcoat's view, *The Story of the Kelly Gang* 'dealt with this aspect of our history and nation building through these bushrangers, but later bushranger films became colonial and costume dramas, not visiting that larger canvas'.[3] To show that 'the cruel reality of the Australian frontier is the story of violent conflict; white on white, white on black, black on white and black on black', Hillcoat sought inspiration from racial conflict in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (Fred Schepisi,1978) and the moral ambiguity of Sam Peckinpah's revisionist westerns.[4] Accordingly, *The Proposition* depicts a series of obliquely related acts of interracial and intra-racial violence and retribution in which heroes, villains and innocent parties are ill-defined.

Film scholar Brian McFarlane argues that *The Proposition* 'reflected more about its time of production than of the period in which it was set', by which he means that, as is the case with westerns, the fantasy of the nation's past that the film articulates is shaped by contemporary sociopolitical perspectives.[5] While McFarlane's valid point will be taken up below in relation to post-*Mabo* attitudes to land rights, there is more at stake in the term 'setting' than the representation of an historical period: every history is grounded in a particular place. If westerns and bushranger films are mythologised versions of history, then their settings are ideologically charged representations of period and place. Genre theorist Jim Kitses argues convincingly that westerns use the setting of the contested frontier landscape of the late 1800s to stage conflict between lawmen and outlaws and validate colonisers' treatment of colonised peoples and places.[6] More recently, Peter Limbrick has described Australian westerns as 'settler colonial texts' that are 'concerned with the process of white subjects dominating space and others'.[7] *The Proposition* problematises this white control over space.



ABOVE: **ARTHUR BURNS (DANNY HUSTON)**
BELOW LEFT: **CHARLIE BURNS (GUY PEARCE) AND ARTHUR BURNS**
BELOW RIGHT: **CHARLIE BURNS**



> The sense of place evoked in *The Proposition* is conveyed through the overexposed, wide-angle images of the bleak, featureless downs that communicate the searing heat of the parched land and the relentless sun.

Since it is the physical location that unites the time of production with the time in which the story takes place, this analysis is grounded in the study of location. Drawing on textual, contextual and historical evidence associated with the film and its setting, I aim to show how location storytelling engages cultural memory, myth, history and the production of what counts as the truth of the Australian outback. To this end, it is necessary to consider the

off-screen story of the film location because Winton played a central role in Australian history and there is much about the town that is alluded to but not made explicit in the film. *The Proposition*'s subplot involving Aboriginal people, 'rebel blacks' living in the ranges, is also important. This storyline spills over the diegetic borders of the film into the credit sequence, the DVD's extra features, and extratextual material to occupy what I term a 'negative space' that is invoked but elided in the film.

Death and the desert: 'Australia. What fresh hell is this?'

How, then, is the representation of landscape in *The Proposition* related to historical and contemporary accounts of the outback location in which the film was shot? In keeping with Ross Gibson's observation that the Australian film landscape is typically viewed through Western eyes,[8] the first view of the landscape offered in *The Proposition* is seen from the perspective of the Englishman, Captain Stanley, as he looks out through the doorway of the bullet-riddled shed in which he has captured Mikey and Charlie Burns. With Stanley's grim words, 'Australia. What fresh hell is this?' we see Jacko (David Gulpilil), the Aboriginal tracker, digging a grave in the ochre-coloured earth, the air around him shimmering with heat. Subsequent shots of rudimentary shafts and pulleys show this location to be a mine site. As Stanley vows, 'I will civilise this land,'[9] a cutaway shows Arthur Burns at his camp on a rocky vantage point, gazing at a blazing desert sunset. Other than establishing itself as the province of violent death where the land is exploited for wealth, the mine does not play a significant role in the narrative. Arthur's hideout, however, does.

Establishing the hideout's location as taboo territory in the fictional Arooka Ranges, Stanley announces, 'I know where Arthur Burns is. The blacks won't go there, nor the trackers. Not even my own men.' The bushrangers' camp and the rock formation where Arthur watches the sunset are located in the Rangeland Rifts just north of Winton, where distinctive, curved ravine-like rifts in the weathered rocks resemble caves. *See image 1.*

This location is marked as taboo in the film dialogue, but it is also a refuge that serves the multiracial 'family' of bushrangers as home, hearth and hospital. Rough hewn bookshelves are built into the cave walls, the otherwise uncouth criminals sing lilting ballads, and an Aboriginal woman (Leah Purcell) tends Charlie's wounds with a mud poultice, linking survival to Indigenous knowledge of the land. As the depiction of the bushrangers' hideout indicates, while the outback is frequently a frightening and inhospitable place in Australian cinema, it also represents escape from the regulations of 'civilised' settlement, a place where 'endless plains salve the heart', as Arthur Burns says. The Rangelands location evokes the dual nature of the bush legend in which the outback is a land of beauty and freedom as well as danger, exile and hardship;[10] however, the latter dominates in *The Proposition*.

The connection between death and the desert landscape that is established in the first exterior shot showing the grave, in the violent shootout that opens the film, in the dialogue and even in the musical score is reinforced when Charlie rides out in search of his brother. He travels through the Hopkins property where three crosses mark the place where Arthur's gang murdered a settler family. The homestead and surrounding land are scorched by fire and shot in desolate grey monochrome to emphasise the location's association with death. This exemplifies how, in narrative action and screen aesthetics, violence is associated with the landscape throughout *The Proposition*. *See image 2.*

The other principal locations of *The Proposition* are Captain Stanley's cottage, the downs between the town of Banyon and the bushrangers' hideout, and the town itself. Those who lived and worked in Winton in its early years described the town as 'the rendezvous of some of the worst characters of the west'.[11] Winton's fictional counterpart, Banyon, does much to live up to this reputation. A huddle of rudimentary buildings and an imposing gaol built at Camara Station on a seemingly endless expanse of dry, red earth, Banyon is represented as being rough, dirty and fearfully isolated – as are its inhabitants. *See image 3.*

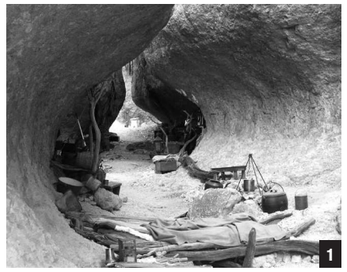
As Gibson observes, 'Australian stories have typically presented the land in frontier terms as an awesome opponent.'[12] The sense of place evoked in *The Proposition* is conveyed through the overexposed, wide-angle images of the bleak, featureless downs that communicate the searing heat of the parched land and the relentless sun. The vast, arid flatlands stretching to the far horizon provoke feelings of vulnerability, insignificance and awe for the outback and those who endure its extreme conditions. Cinematographer Benoit Delhomme manipulated contrast and light to make the audience feel the heat and to 'increase the violence of the landscape, to show how hard it really was to live and survive there'.[13] From this Eurocentric perspective the land presented a character-building challenge to white settlers; however, for Aborigines, the relationship with the land has been very different and 'the other side of the frontier presents a history of invasion, near genocide and cultural obliteration'.[14]

Tourism and contested outback histories in a post-*Mabo* landscape

In *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, Felicity Collins and Therese Davis tackle issues such as Aboriginal land rights, reconciliation and shifting concepts of history and national identity as the nation reassesses its 'founding myth' of terra nullius in the 'aftershock' of *Mabo*. They argue that the High Court of Australia's *Mabo v Queensland (No. 2*) decision of 1992 caused a paradigm shift in thinking about identity, the land and belonging in Australia, and suggest that 'our relation to landscape, as the template of national identity in Australian cinema, might also be undergoing a paradigm shift'.[15]

Hillcoat's film was produced after *Mabo*, and thus after the legal doctrine of terra nullius, which saw pre-colonial Australia as an empty land belonging to no one, was officially discredited. Collins and Davis point out that in contemporary Australia:

There is now a popular awareness that the continent has been written over by Indigenous languages, songlines, dreaming stories and Law for 40 000 years or more. Since the Mabo decision at least, the image of the outback landscape in cinema provokes recognition of historical amnesia (rather than an unknowable, sublime, interior void) as the founding structure of settler Australia's myths of belonging.[16]



As McFarlane noted, *The Proposition* reveals much about the time of its production and it is clear that the film emerges from this post-*Mabo* sensibility.*The Proposition* signals its contribution to rewriting colonial history by opening and closing with a mixture of images from the film itself and archival photographs including a photograph of explorer William Landsborough with two Aboriginal guides, Jack and Jemmy Fisherman, who accompanied him on an expedition skirting the Winton region in 1862.

Despite the isolation and extreme climate, early white explorers had great hopes for the pastoral possibilities of the area and the Winton region starred in some of Australia's grandest dreams and bush legends. Settlement of the area began in the 1870s when Oondooroo Station was established immediately north of Winton where the Rangelands and Camara stations are now, and Bladensburg Station, now a national park, was formed just south of the town. By 1895, when he wrote 'Waltzing Matilda' at the Combo Billabong on Dagworth Station in the Winton Shire, Banjo Paterson told of 'squatter kings' flourishing on Winton's stations. In years of good rainfall, the grasslands of the Winton downs attracted pastoralists seeking to make their fortunes on the land.

Today tourism is an important element of Winton due to the historic significance of the area, the incredible landscape and the town's location on the main overland route to visit Uluru or Kakadu. In 'Tourism, Governance and the (Mis-)location of Power', C. Michael Hall argues:

> *Institutional representations and reconstructions of heritage are often not fully inclusive. Particular ideologies are represented to the tourist through museums, historic houses, historic monuments and markers, guided tours, public spaces, heritage precincts and landscapes in a manner that may act to legitimate current social and political structures.*[17]

The validity of Hall's insight is evident in the way that Banjo Paterson's early presence in the area and Winton's claim to being the birthplace of 'Waltzing Matilda' and Qantas have eclipsed Indigenous cultural heritage, which is transmitted mainly through oral history and ritual. The Australian Stockman's Hall of Fame and Outback Heritage Centre in nearby Longreach also privileges the stories of white settlers. The legitimating function of institutional reconstructions of heritage and the discrepancy between the dominant settler colonial narrative and poorly documented Aboriginal accounts are acutely apparent in the contested history of a site just south of Winton called Skull Hole. Skull Hole is best known as a scenic stop on the Route of the River Gums tourist drive through Bladensburg National Park but, consistent with colonial naming practices, the name designates a place where violent deaths occurred. Across Australia, sites with names such as Skull Creek mark the locations of Aboriginal massacres.

1: BUSHRANGERS' CAMP AT THE RANGELAND RIFTS, PHOTO COURTESY OF FORMER WINTON MAYOR BRUCE COLLINS 2: DEAD SHEEP ON THE BURNT HOPKINS FARM, COURTESY OF BRUCE COLLINS 3: THE BANYON SET, COURTESY OF BRUCE COLLINS 4: SKULL HOLE, WINTON, PHOTO BY AUTHOR

Negative space and unspeakable history: the Skull Hole Massacre

Skull Hole is not named in *The Proposition* but its presence as a 'negative space' in the film is palpable. The subplot involving the Aboriginal massacre and the involvement of black troopers in these deaths has disturbing parallels with Winton's history. Aboriginal representative Pearl Eatts, who advised the filmmakers in accordance with the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003 (Qld), describes her role as explaining the cultural and historical significance of the film locations in order to give another side to the story regarding the Indigenous experience of colonisation.[18] Skull Hole was scouted as a location for *The Proposition*, but Eatts indicated that areas of the site where Aboriginal people were shot by black troopers and white police were 'too sensitive' to be filmed.[19] The filmmakers therefore shot in Scrammy Gorge, another

small river gum gorge rimmed with a ridge of red rock, geographically located nearby in Bladensburg National Park and narratively situated on Charlie's journey from Banyon into the outlying ranges. However, traces of Skull Hole still mark the film. *See image 4.*

An unsettling process of narrative invocation and elision of Skull Hole and its history occurs in the film when white police and black troopers capture six 'rebel blacks' and kill one of them. Captain Stanley's superior, Eden Fletcher (David Wenham), orders the police to track down the remaining Aborigines, saying 'make sure you bloody well kill them all' to prevent retaliation. When tracker Jacko translates for the captives, it is revealed that they weren't renegades hiding in the hills. In direct refutation of the terra nullius myth, Jacko explains: 'They don't hide in the ranges, they live in the ranges. They've *always* been living in the ranges.' Nevertheless, fearing retaliation, the police ride into the ranges with Jacko to track and kill the Aborigines. The dead are shown briefly in a chilling interstitial image that compounds the sense of the Rangelands as a dangerous and violent place. Unlike the site at which the settler family is murdered, marked in the exposition by neat white graves, the Aboriginal massacre site is not shown. The scene is filmed at night without an establishing shot, only the sound of distant gunfire and a glimpse of slain black bodies shrouded by deep blue shadows in the aftermath of violence.

The motivation for the black rebellion remains unexplained, as does the reason Charlie is speared when he comes upon a dead Aborigine on his way to Arthur's hideout. It would make narrative sense if Charlie was speared because he is white and the Aborigines were, as the dialogue suggests, 'retaliating' for one of their number being killed by the police. However, the dead Aborigine Charlie sees has been speared, not shot, suggesting black-on-black violence. In another of the film's indirect acts of retaliation, the unprovoked attack on Charlie is avenged by the young bushranger Samuel (Tom Budge), who brags of his marksmanship after shooting the Aborigine.

The violence against Aborigines is echoed at the end of the film, again located outside the representable space of the narrative, when we see 'a series of appalling black-and-white photographs of Aboriginals scattered among the credits – of Aboriginals in chains and of white men beating them'.[20] McFarlane comments:

Those in the substantial audience who didn't wait for the credits missed this statement of, one assumes, the film-makers' intentions as far as Indigenous people are concerned … The Proposition*, by not sentimentalising them, by not offering noble savage images, makes as powerful a statement on their behalf as any Australian film has*.[21]

McFarlane is right that the film makes a powerful statement, but it is necessarily an ambivalent statement that seeks to represent a complex range of competing subject positions in a contested history while still narrating the story from a predominantly Eurocentric perspective. Indeed, the only records of the Skull Hole massacre and other incidents of its kind are written by whites.

The earliest recorded story of Skull Hole is found in Norwegian ethnographer Carl Lumholtz's 1889 book, *Among Cannibals*, which documents his travels through Australia. On Bladensburg Station in November 1880, Lumholtz wrote:

I was shown a large number of skulls of natives who had been shot by the black police in the following circumstances: – A couple of teams with provisions for the far west, conducted by two white men, had encamped near the blacks. The latter were lying in ambush, and meant to make an assault, as two black women had been ravished by the white men. Instead of defending themselves with their weapons, the white men were cowardly enough to take flight, leaving all their provisions, oxen, tent, and all their other things in the hands of the blacks. The fugitives reported to the police that they had been attacked and so the 'criminals' a few weeks afterwards were pursued far into a narrow valley and shot. I visited the spot in company with the manager of Bledensbourne [sic] station, and saw seven or eight of the skulls. According to the statement made by several persons, nearly the whole tribe was killed, as there was no opportunity of flight.[22]

Lumholtz describes this and other cruelties perpetrated by the Queensland Native Police as a 'black page in the annals of Australian colonisation'.[23] It is this 'black page' that I seek to invoke and examine using the concept of 'negative space'.

According to parliamentarian W.H. 'Harry' Corfield, who made his living in the 1870s carrying wagonloads of supplies through the outback, violence was not restricted to the black community or to the Winton area. Corfield gives a horrific account of racial violence in northern Queensland in 1875, including his own participation when black troopers and white police tracked and killed Aborigines who had murdered a settler family and two teamsters near Palmer River.[24] He goes on to say that by 1879 Winton itself was so troubled that

A few residents formed themselves into a vigilance committee. The late Mr. J.A. Macartney passed through to visit his property, Bladensburg Station, and seeing how things were, wrote to the Home Secretary asking for police protection.[25]

Like the sketchy account of the Aboriginal massacre in *The Proposition*, the story of the deaths at Skull Hole found in contemporary tourism brochures and websites publicising Bladensburg National Park has scant detail. The version of history offered to tourists omits the inciting incident involving the rape of black women, shifting responsibility away from white settlers by suggesting the Native Police were retaliating for the unprovoked murder of a white man.[26] *A Vision Splendid*, the history of the district commissioned by the Winton Shire Council, contests whether the massacre occurred at all. The authors argue that 'by the late 1870s, it was not possible to shoot Aborigines with impunity in the Winton district, certainly not possible that no record at all would be left of such an episode', hence they speculate that Lumholtz may have been shown a traditional burial site by locals seeking to 'impress him with the belief that the Winton frontier was a dangerous place and they were a brave set of fellows who thought nothing of shooting Aborigines, wholesale'.[27] This officially sanctioned history is at odds with Lumholtz's travelogue and Corfield's claim that Bladensburg Station called for police protection and locals formed a vigilante group in 1879. However obliquely, the scene in which the 'rebel blacks' are slain in *The Proposition* contributes to the mythology of Skull Hole and hence to both aspects of the film's setting: the colonial historical period and the location in which the story takes place.

Conclusion

I have argued *The Proposition* is a product of its time and place. It is a product of its setting in the remote Australian outback in the 1880s and it is a post-*Mabo* film that participates in rewriting Australia's colonial past while reproducing a well-established narrative of the national character based on an ambivalent relationship to the iconic outback landscape. In *The Proposition*, as in many Australian films, 'The land takes on a narrative function beyond that of mere setting'; its role is to produce an image of Australia in which the land forges hardened characters whose actions are justified, in part, by the harsh conditions and isolation they must survive.[28] However, rather than legitimating ill-treatment of the land's original inhabitants, *The Proposition* forms part of a renegotiation of Australian history that intersects with other accounts of the place and its past, including those directed at contemporary travellers. Like the cinematic storyline that makes passing moral judgement on protagonists in *The Proposition* difficult, the institutionally sanctioned versions of history circulating about the film location also form a narrative in which responsibility and causation are obscured.

Australian landscape cinema has a complicated relationship with history and national identity in which representations of the land correspond to ideological values and understandings of belonging, exile and endurance. Contemporary views of Australian history are increasingly nuanced; however, while narratives such as *The Proposition* actively refute the myth of terra nullius and try to represent both sides of colonisation by acknowledging Indigenous perspectives, the rewriting of history is still primarily done by white Australians in media, education, tourism, and governance. Public memory is often informed by an acceptance of the 'truth' of 'history that is written, exhibited, or otherwise publicly sanctioned. What is less obvious to the public is that the writing or the exhibition itself is reflective of a particular ideology.'[29] The varied attributions of blame in the contested accounts of the Skull Hole Massacre reveal Australia to be in the process of renegotiating cultural perceptions of place. The stories of Skull Hole surveyed in this article may each tell a truth of the past, since similar incidents occurred across Australia at the time. The only constant in these narratives is the place itself, an isolated outback location named for the human skulls found there.

This article was refereed.

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Endnotes

1 Graeme Turner, *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative*, 2nd edn, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1993, p.34. Turner sees film and myth as narrative processes that make sense of ideological tensions and articulate cultural values and beliefs.
2 John Hillcoat, *The Proposition* Production Notes, 2005, p.8.
3 Hillcoat quoted in Peter Krausz, 'The Making of *The Proposition*', *Metro*, no. 146/147, 2005, p.20.
4 ibid.
5 Brian McFarlane, 'Brokeback and Outback', *Meanjin*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2006, p.66.
6 Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1969.
7 Peter Limbrick, 'The Australian Western, or a Settler Colonial Cinema *par excellence*', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 46, no. 4, 2007, pp.68–95. The films Limbrick considers are *The Overlanders* (Harry Watt, 1946), *Eureka Stockade* (Harry Watt, 1949) and *Bitter Springs* (Ralph Smart, 1950).
8 Ross Gibson, 'Camera Natura: Landscape in Australian Feature Films', in John Frow & Meaghan Morris (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1993, p.219.
9 Stanley's vow to 'civilise the land' is paralleled by his wife's efforts to cultivate a rose garden and uphold English customs.
10 Turner, op. cit., p.22.
11 W.H. Corfield, *Reminiscences of Queensland, 1862–1899*, A.H. Frater, H. Pole & Co. Ltd., Brisbane, 1921, p.78.
12 Ross Gibson, *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992, p.71.
13 Hillcoat, op. cit., p.19.
14 Susan Dermody & Elizabeth Jacka, *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a Film Industry*, Vol. 2, Currency Press, Sydney, 1987, p.19.
15 Felicity Collins & Therese Davis, *Australian Cinema after Mabo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p.78.
16 ibid., p.76.
17 C. Michael Hall, 'Tourism, Governance and the (Mis-)location of Power', in Andrew Church & Tim Coles (eds), *Tourism, Power and Space*, Routledge, London, 2007, p.258.
18 Pearl Eatts, 'Cultural Heritage Featurette,' *The Proposition* DVD, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006.
19 ibid.
20 McFarlane, op. cit., p.68.
21 ibid.
22 Carl Lumholtz, *Among Cannibals: Account of Four Years Travels in Australia and of Camp Life with the Aborigines of Queensland*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1980 (first published John Murray Publishers, London, 1889), pp.58–59.
23 ibid., p.59.
24 Corfield, op. cit., p.64.
25 ibid., p.78.
26 Winton tourism brochures state: 'Following the murder of a teamster near 20 mile, an aboriginal fugitive retreated into the Bladensburg hills. A Sergeant Moran, then in charge of the Winton police station, tracked the murderers. On being attacked he dealt punitive measures to his assailants, climaxing in a final episode at what became known as Skull Hole, where the tribe was massacred by black troopers.' The same account features on websites such as ExplorOz: see 'Bladensburg National Park,' <http://www.exploroz.com/Places/65221/QLD/Bladensburg_National_Park.aspx>, accessed 10 July 2009.
27 Peter Forrest & Sheila Forrest, *Vision Splendid: A History of the Winton District, Western Queensland*, Winton Shire Council and Winton District Historical Society & Museum Inc., Winton, 2005, p.52.
28 Turner, op. cit., p.29.
29 M.K. Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History, and Ethnicity in Monterey, California*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1993, p.5.