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‘How do you plead?’: Guilt, Responsibility and Reconciliation on the Frontier in Rolf de Heer’s The Tracker (2002)

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Around a third of the way into Rolf de Heer’s historical film The Tracker (2002), the four main characters stop amid a field of stones in the middle of the outback. It is ‘somewhere in Australia’ in 1922 and the Fanatic (Gary Sweet), the Veteran (Grant Page), and the Follower (Damon Gameau) are part of a police expedition in pursuit of an Indigenous man accused of the murder of a white woman (the Accused, Noel Wilton). They are accompanied by the enigmatic Tracker (David Gulpilil), who seems to be both leading the expedition and enslaved by it. All four are stopped amongst the stones because the Follower, “a man new to the frontier”, as the film tells us, has questioned the Tracker’s abilities. “Anyone can see he’s not really tracking”, he says, “he’s just following his nose, and hoping for the best”. Under orders from the volatile Fanatic, however, the Tracker is made to explain, in an almost comical way, how it is that he can follow the Accused. “That stone missing”, he says, pointing to one small and indistinguishable stone of many. “It’s been kicked away, about two hours ago... Plenty signs like this”. In response, the Follower is incredulous and then contrite: ‘Is that all you need?... Sorry’.

The Follower’s apology is a moment of significance in this film; it is followed by a lingering close-up of the Tracker’s almost-smiling face which makes clear that he has taken note, that this admission of wrongdoing is meaningful. It also gestures towards some of The Tracker’s central concerns in its telling of the history of the frontier: that of the politics and productiveness of apologies, guilt, blame, responsibility, and reconciliation. Released at a time of substantial historical controversy in Australia – a time of ‘frontier skirmishes’, as the title of this collection suggests – de Heer’s film engaged in what I think was a very concrete historical project. Whilst historians in particular are often very wary of films like The Tracker – where authorial absences, seamless constructions, a preoccupation with historical detail, and eyewitness perspectives are all viewed as creating simplistic, inaccurate, and distorting representations of the past – this wariness can sometimes obscure the importance of the films themselves.¹ Film, as Jay Winter has written, sometimes “ministers, it challenges conventional categories of thought [and] it moves the viewer” (857). Historical films can be what Natalie Zemon Davis famously called “thought experiments” about the past, at times offering valuable and innovative insights (14–15); in other words, historical films have the potential to undertake historical work, to attempt to make sense of the past in (and for) their presents. The (many) authors of historical films are thus “historians”, according to Robert Rosenstone, “if by that word we mean people who

¹ Jane Lydon’s discussion of the problems of some recent Australian historical films, including The Tracker, is a perfect example of the wariness I am referring to here. See also, for example, Herlihy; Rosenstone, 2001, 54–57; Sobchack, 9; and White.
It is certainly possible to critique *The Tracker*’s fictionalised historical mode and representational choices, thereby diminishing the relevance of its history-making. In this chapter, however, I would like to look instead to the ways in which the past was told in this film, and in particular to the film’s foregrounding of notions of collective and historical guilt. In doing so, I am drawing particularly on Rosenstone’s suggestion that historians approach historical films with the meaning and importance of the film’s vision of the past firmly in mind (Rosenstone 2006, 49). Historical veracity or claims to truthfulness are consequently not my concern here; rather, it is the themes and preoccupations of the film itself, as well as the context of its release. Although *The Tracker* was problematically viewed by some as an example of what Jane Lydon called “a means of expatiating white guilt” (140) – “a not particularly subtle motivation when it comes to making films”, as Vicky Roach commented at the time of its release (9) – I would argue that guilt in fact functioned in the film as a productive force. Not only did *The Tracker* seek to acknowledge guilt and responsibility for the crimes and injustices of Australia’s frontiered pasts, but it also symbolically apportioned blame for these events. The film worked to suggest that guilt has the potential to function as a transformative force on the frontier, prompting restorative action. As such, *The Tracker* had something important to say about contemporary understandings and negotiations of this past. Viewed from this perspective, *The Tracker* was not so much indicative of a displacement of ongoing unease regarding the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia as it was an intervention into precisely the cultural debates this collection seeks to track. The film proposed a way of understanding this past infused with guilt, blame, and responsibility that also, I think, offered a way forward in the consideration and comprehension of the events of this past.

*The Tracker*, of course, was released in the wake of a series of public and very politicised debates about Australian history at the turn of the twenty-first century. For Stuart Macintyre, these ‘history wars’ – contestations over the past which echoed similar battles in the United States, Japan, Germany, and especially the other settler societies of Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa – were manifested in a “public surveillance” of history-writing and history-making, extending “from what historians say about the past to the methods they employ to say it” (Macintyre and Clark 8, 10; see also Attwood, 2005; Bonnell & Crotty; Curthoys & Docker, 220–27; and Yonetani). Macintyre characterised this pernicious surveillance as a war against history:

This campaign was prosecuted in the public arena but it involved a struggle to win control of cultural institutions such as the ABC and the National Museum, and efforts to discredit the historical profession and other academics with specialist expertise in interpreting the past. (Macintyre and Clark 238–39)

These battles, however, were more than just ‘attacks’ on historians and their work. Rather, they were part of a larger series of public conversations and contestations about the nature and legacy of Australia’s colonisation. Within these conversations were disputes not just about what happened, but also, and perhaps more importantly, about how to understand what happened, about what to do with this past. Historians and their
histories, as Macintyre rightly pointed out, were certainly a focal point for these conversations, but they could also be found in the pages of local and national newspapers, in state and federal parliamentary debates, in legal judgements, museum exhibitions, public protests, monuments and memorials, and days of commemoration, as well as in countless plays, novels, and films. They were emotional conversations, often pitting pride in the perceived achievements of the Australian nation against sorrow for the destruction seen to have frequently been wrought in that nation’s name. They were also emotional in the sense that they were disputes over the emotional relationship of contemporary Australians to the nation’s past, with the ways in which Australians related to the nation. Was this positively or negatively? In good or bad faith? With love or hate? Pride or guilt?

Precisely this type of contestation over the legacy of European colonisation could be seen in the decade-long debates over the commemoration of Australia’s Bicentenary in 1988. They were present too in the responses to Prime Minister Paul Keating’s “Redfern Speech” in 1992; in the controversy surrounding the 2002 release of Phillip Noyce’s film of the stolen generations, Rabbit-Proof Fence; in debates over the exhibits at the recently opened National Museum of Australia in 2003; and in the aftermath of the publication of Kate Grenville’s best-selling historical novel The Secret River in 2005. Of most significance for The Tracker, however, were the debates which followed the release of the Bringing Them Home report into the stolen generations in 1997 (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission).

Bringing Them Home was the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s report into the government-sponsored practice of forcible removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families throughout much of the twentieth century. The report concluded that the policy had intended to eliminate Australia’s Indigenous populations in what the Commission termed acts of genocide (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 266). Bringing Them Home recommended that parliaments, police forces, and churches apologise for their involvement in child removal and that a national Sorry Day be celebrated each year. In the aftermath of the Report’s release apologies were made by all state governments, the Catholic Church, police forces, the Australian Council of Trade Unions and the Australian Council of Social Services. These were followed by a grassroots movement of individual apologies which began with the opening of the first of many ‘sorry books’ in Sydney on Australia Day in 1998; four months later, around one million people were thought to have apologised (for an examination see Gooder & Jacobs).

In contrast, the conservative federal government publicly and vigorously questioned the findings of Bringing Them Home and steadfastly refused to apologise for events of the past (for an overview see Attwood 2001; Haebich; Kennedy; Manne 2001, 2003). Instead, the government passed a “Motion of Reconciliation” in which Prime Minister John Howard said the following:

The Australian people do not want to embroil themselves in an exercise of shame and guilt. The Australian people know that injustices were committed. But for the overwhelming majority of the current generations of Australians, there was no personal involvement of them or of their parents. To say to them that they are personally
responsible and that they should feel a sense of shame about those events is to visit upon them an unreasonable penalty and an injustice. (Howard 1999)

As Mark McKenna noted at the time, however, the Prime Minister could not "control the discussion of history in the wider popular culture" where "other voices [would] be heard, other versions told" (80). The Tracker was one such voice. Although it referred to a different (though not unrelated) past, The Tracker can clearly be situated within the guilty contexts of Australia’s so-called sorry debates, along with the wider context of the question of what to do with the history of colonisation. Indeed, Rolf de Heer characterised The Tracker as a filmic contribution to Indigenous peoples’ search for an apology, acknowledgement, and reconciliation: "Part of it is a response to a particular political situation", according to de Heer. "When I first wrote The Tracker, ‘sorry’ wasn’t an issue and reconciliation hadn’t been invented but it’s still largely the same film and sentiments" (cited in James 71). The film emerged from this context vehemently refusing Prime Minister Howard’s plea to Australians to reject notions of guilt or shame in any contemplation of the nation’s colonised and colonising past. Instead, The Tracker was a film infused with guilt, as both a state and a feeling.

Importantly, Australia at the turn of the twenty-first century was not the only context in which questions of historical guilt rose to prominence. Indeed, according to the political theorist Elazar Barkan the late-twentieth century witnessed a “growing political willingness, and at times eagerness, to admit one’s historical guilt” (Barkan xxvii; see also Carroll). In line with what Barkan calls the increasing desire to “redress the past”, many nations seemed to be concerned with questions of guilt, apology, reparation, responsibility, and justice. Barkan (perhaps optimistically) called this the beginnings of a new era of “international morality” (ix). There were, however, numerous examples of community and government leaders apologising, accepting responsibility, and providing compensation for events of the past. Under the Clinton Administration, the United States apologised for undertaking medical experiments on African American servicemen in the 1950s, for its delay in intervening in the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, and to the people of Ghana for the slave trade (see Pope). In 1997 Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair could be found expressing remorse for Britain’s role in the Irish potato famine of the 1840s (Cunningham). And in 1998 the Canadian government officially apologised for the past and present mistreatment of its Indigenous peoples (DePalma).

As Graham Little noted, “saying sorry [had] become an important political act and a small but vital element in cultural and social relations” (Little 210). As the Australian example testifies, however, official apologies or admissions of guilt rarely came swiftly or easily. Discussions of historical guilt were often accompanied by acrimonious debate, in part due to the impact admissions of guilt and wrongdoing were seen to have on national identities. Admissions of historical guilt suggested a willingness to accept (some) responsibility, if not for events of the past themselves, then for restitution or the

2 For examples of some of these debates in South Africa see Diala; Nuttal and Coetzee; and Villa-Vicencio. In Germany: Harada; Jaspers; Löw; and Rensman. And in Australia: Manderson; Power; and Williams. My discussion of guilt in this section is drawn in part on the work of Jaspers.
provision of restorative justice. When Prime Minister Howard talked of personal responsibility as an "unreasonable penalty", then, it was in part because he understood an apology to be an admission of guilt inferring individual responsibility for events of the past. But guilt, and especially historical guilt, is not always understood in this way. Often (but not universally) contrasted with shame, guilt can be used to describe both a state (the state of being guilty of something) and an emotion (of feeling culpable) (see Little 190). These guilts can be individual, collective, criminal, psychological, political, liberal, or moral. Barkan’s guilt is a collective social or liberal-humanist version, where "being part of liberal society also means that the public expects justice and feels guilty when implicated by justice". This guilt is, for Barkan, a powerful political tool, capable of "transforming daily sentimentality and universal humanitarianism into a political agenda" (315, 316). Nyla Branscombe and Bertjan Doosje have written of a similar type of collective guilt that they argue "has an important role to play in the creation of improved social conditions following a violent past" (7).

It was into this wider context that The Tracker’s guilty representation of the frontier was released, and the film engaged with ideas of guilt in two different ways. On the one hand, it sought to symbolically ascribe a type of political and criminal guilt – the state of being guilty – to a particular version of white Australian masculinity, a masculinity embodied in the figure of the Fanatic. On the other, the film’s depiction of the Follower’s journey demonstrated the transformative power of feeling guilty or responsible elaborated by Barkan and Branscombe and Doosje. The Tracker was inspired by stories of early contact and conflict between Indigenous Australians and European colonisers. Although variously described by reviewers as a western, a musical, an art film, a social problem film, a fable, a parable and a vision, The Tracker was a story of the journeys – individual, collective, physical and metaphorical – undertaken by these men. The film is was what Brian McFarlane called an extended “meditation on racism” (62). The Tracker’s past is an unpredictable, violent and murderous place. Its characters are known only to the audience as representational figures, introduced with little background or context. The expedition is led by the Fanatic, whom we are told is a mounted policeman who “does not dwell on statistics”. The Fanatic is accompanied by the Follower, “new to the frontier”, the

3 In much of his discussion of the stolen generations and Bringing Them Home, Prime Minister Howard sought to highlight this notion that ‘current generations’ of Australians cannot be held accountable for events of the past in this manner. For a critique of this generational denial of responsibility see Dodson. Interestingly, ‘current generations’ could, however, be held accountable for the treatment of Vietnam veterans in the aftermath of the Vietnam War: “I think its one of the things of which this country should collectively feel quite embarrassed and ashamed”, he said in November 2006 (cited in AM). Although written from a very different perspective, Bernhard Schlink’s recent work on collective guilt – in which he argues that only those in ‘communities of solidarity’ with perpetrators can be collectively implicated in guilt for events of the past – in a sense echoes the attitudes of Howard and other conservatives (Schlink).

4 Interestingly, Barkan seems to be talking about a politically-productive attitude towards others in a manner that is similar to Judith Butler’s analysis of grief (Butler 10).
Veteran, who has been "drafted into this expedition", and the Tracker, of whom "little is known".

In depriving the film’s characters of names, de Heer accorded them a particularly representational quality – they are representative of "particular points of view" or "symbolic states of mind", as Ron Banks suggests (2002a, 6). Aiding in the construction of The Tracker’s symbolic form was the film’s use of paintings and song to drive the narrative. The film featured fourteen paintings by the Australian artist Peter Coad, who was commissioned to produce artworks specifically for the film. Coad’s paintings were used primarily to depict violence on the screen without the need for realistic or sensationalist representation. And, indeed, Coad deliberately eschewed realism in the shading and perspective of his works, instead using distortion to symbolically highlight what he called “the emotional and mental conflict” of the characters and victims (Coad 14). In this way, the paintings were not intended to merely represent “an act of violence by one person against another”, but “all acts of violence by these people against those people”, according to de Heer. Similarly, the lyrics of de Heer’s songs (composed by Graham Tardiff and sung by Archie Roach) also pointed towards the symbolic and representational aspirations of the film. The Tracker’s songs were an integral part of the film’s narrative, commenting on the visual action and emphasising the thematic nature of the story (see Hope). Indeed, they were powerful vehicles for the film’s intervention into wider conversations about Australia’s colonisation.

The Tracker’s history of the Australian frontier, then, was clearly told in a symbolic mode. And, indeed, commentators at the time characterised the film as symbolically concerned with notions of redemption, retribution, and reconciliation. It is the film’s meditation on guilt, however, that seems to be of most significance, particularly given the guilty context of the film’s release. Although Lydon and Roach were troubled by the guilt which may (or may not) have motivated de Heer and his collaborators in the making of the film, my interest is in the ways in which this film attached notions of guilt to the contemplation of its past.

The Tracker presented characters confronting guilt on the frontier, both as a state and as a feeling. In the Fanatic The Tracker offered a character who is deemed guilty; he is quite clearly held directly responsible for the actions of the unjust, discriminatory, and criminal state of which he is representative. As a consequence, the film rendered those in positions of authority as symbolically responsible for the crimes and injustices committed against Indigenous peoples on Australia’s frontiers. Like many contemporary Australian historical fictions – and I’m thinking particularly of Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang and Kate Grenville’s The Secret River here – The Tracker was thus engaged in the representation of the white male subject, who in many (and very familiar) ways is made to stand in for the Australian nation. Unlike

Redemption: “Rolf de Heer’s latest film, set in 1922, is a tale of systematic brutality, cold-blooded slaughter, rough justice, and a kind of redemption” (Roach 9). Retribution: “In the shattering conclusion, The Tracker becomes a film about retribution rather than reconciliation” (Banks 2002a, 6). Reconciliation: “The young Follower, naïve, at first scornful of the ‘native’, gradually learns to respect him, and in the end joins the triumphant Tracker, in a parable of Reconciliation” (Lydon 140). De Heer also often mentioned the “reconciliation and redemption in the characters” when talking about the film. See, for example, Banks 2002b, Today 6.
many of these texts, however, this film constituted the white Australian male as a perpetrator rather than a victim. The film laid blame and responsibility at the feet of the white Australian male, who is held accountable for the violent, murderous, and destructive events on the frontier. It did not do so, however, by constructing the white Australian male as universally guilty; white Australian men are not always and everywhere to blame in this manner. Instead, *The Tracker* depicted gradations of guilt, seen most clearly in the differences between the figures of the Tracker and the Follower (a difference I will elaborate on below). Political, criminal guilt, then, was attached specifically to the figure of the Fanatic.

Ostensibly in control of the search party, *The Tracker*’s Fanatic is, as his name suggests, an excessively enthusiastic participant in the film’s hunt for the Accused. Gary Sweet considered the Fanatic to be “a character who is almost completely amoral, who displays no empathy or sympathy” with others (DVD Interviews, *The Tracker*). He is, as Sweet suggests, pathological in his behaviour. Fierce, menacing, and almost sadistic, the Fanatic is rarely seen without a gun in his hands, “your best friends out here”, as he remarks to the Follower. Despite the absence of character background in the film, it is clear from the outset that the Fanatic is a dangerous figure. He is an uncompromising, righteous, and violent man whose danger stems in part from his unpredictability. On the one hand, for example, he admonishes the Follower for failing to respect the skills and knowledge of the Tracker in the scene I described at the outset of this chapter; on the other, his interactions with the Tracker often display the contempt in which he holds Indigenous peoples.

Without question, the Fanatic symbolises a particular version of white Australian masculinity — and, perhaps, white Australian authority — that is condemned within the film, a condemnation made very clear by the manner of his death. At the beginning of the film’s long climactic scene, the Fanatic begins to lecture the Tracker on his inferiority: “I must admit I’ve come across one or two natives during my travels who were good”, he begins. “I’ve seen that the blacks can be made tractable and docile, but you have to be both firm and kind with them”, he continues, outlining his dream to “raise [the] condition” of the “natives”. Once the Fanatic reaches the end of his lecture — “I don’t know if any of that means anything to you”, he concludes, “but if it does I’d like you to think about it” — he is suddenly alarmed by the Tracker’s movements. Chained to a tree by the repentant Follower and absorbed in his own lessons, the Fanatic had completely failed to notice the Tracker preparing to use the neck-chain as a noose. Once he does, the Tracker speaks: “You are charged with the murder of innocent people”, he informs the disbelieving Fanatic. “How do you plead?”:

> On behalf of my people, and all people, I am your judge and jury... I find you guilty as charged. By your actions you have forfeited the right to live among your fellow humans. I sentence you to hang by the neck until dead.

6 As Felicity Collins and Therese Davis have noted, the Fanatic’s hanging is a narrative reversal of the hanging suicide of David Gulpilil’s character in Nicholas Roeg’s *Walkabout* (1971). See Collins and Davis, 50.
As the Tracker’s judgement makes clear, the Fanatic is guilty of the murder of Indigenous peoples. It is the Fanatic who leads and encourages the murder of those unlucky enough to cross the tracking party’s path. Fond of his gun and convinced of the inevitability of the destruction of Indigenous society, the Fanatic is always ready to slaughter innocent people for the supposed good of the nation. After encouraging the Follower to round up, chain, taunt, and shoot a small group of Indigenous people, the Fanatic explains his viewpoint:

They’re cannibals. Very treacherous. You have to kill them...Kid, the government employs me. They supply me with men, rifles, ammunition in abundance. How do they expect me to use them? For the benefit of the country.

Although the Follower is deeply troubled by his actions and subsequently plagued by remorse, the Fanatic experiences no such feelings. Instead, he methodically sets about continuing the search – “We’ll hoist them as a warning” is his only acknowledgement of the murders that have just occurred by his hand.

As the sun rises over the Fanatic’s hanging body, however, the song “My History” seems to suggest the Tracker was not only in pursuit of justice in the face of these murders, but also of forgiveness:

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 grieve my history
...  
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.

The Fanatic’s journey seems to suggest the importance of declarations of legal or criminal guilt, even if, as is the case here, this guilt is not admitted or acknowledged by the perpetrator. For the Tracker, it is not enough to murder the Fanatic in retribution for his many crimes. Rather, his guilt must be pronounced, and it seems particularly important that this pronouncement takes place in the form of a (western) legal statement.

Contrition, however, requires more than just the punishment of the guilty, and the type of guilt ascribed to the Fanatic is not the only form of guilt present in the film. Whilst the violent and murderous Fanatic is judged guilty, the character of the Follower is conversely burdened by feelings of guilt. Within the world of this film, the Follower’s guilt functions as a positive force, driving him to action. The Tracker’s engagement with notions of guilt, then, is not only about who can and should be blamed for the events of the past; guilt is also the first in a series of steps towards remorse and reconciliation.
‘HOW DO YOU PLEAD?’

Naïve and inexperienced, the Follower begins as a diligent and contentious member of the tracking party, taking care to consider “everything through duty”. He is, as a consequence, mindful of the expedition’s chain of command, which leaves him ill-equipped to escape the directives of the Fanatic. Prior to his apology to the Tracker, the Follower is shown taunting the Fanatic’s Indigenous captives and, presumably, participating in their murder. He is profoundly disturbed in the aftermath of these murders, impervious to the Fanatic’s explanation of their national necessity.

In the wake of his apology, however – and, I would suggest, his recognition of feelings of guilt – the Follower’s actions undergo a radical change. Importantly, he is no longer under the control of the Fanatic. Instead, he continually challenges the Fanatic’s authority, eventually overriding him altogether during a tense scene at another Indigenous camp. “Drop the gun”, he says as he takes aim at the Fanatic, who is himself aiming at a group of Indigenous people:

> They’re innocent women and children. Drop the gun... Now, we’re going to go on and capture this fugitive we’ve been after. Then you and him will both stand trial for murder. If you behave between now and then, I’ll testify to that. And might just recommend leniency.

He also listens to the Tracker, particularly when they finally reach the Accused. The Follower asks the Tracker why, as a Christian, he allowed the Accused to be punished with “tribal justice”, which saw the Tracker spear him in the leg: “God respect Aboriginal law as much as he respect whitefella’s law”, the Tracker explained. “Maybe more. Now if you wanna stay alive, you better be quiet and follow me”.

The Follower does so, and is the only white man to survive as a result. The Follower’s actions seem largely driven by feelings of guilt and remorse for the events of which he is both witness and participant; he is a character driven by his contrition. The Tracker ends with the Follower watching the character of the Tracker ride across the desert towards his country, morphing into the film’s final painting. It is a portrait of the Follower’s perspective of the landscape, intended to convey a sense of the possibility of reconciliation, according to Peter Coad: “The stilled entities of the landscape convey a world touched by optimism, unexpected hope and a positive revelatory force that alludes to the reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australia” (34).

I’m less certain, however, that the film’s ending – or, indeed, the film itself – is as neat as Coad’s comments imply. Clearly, The Tracker’s history of the frontier was preoccupied with ideas of guilt. In its characterisations and narrative, de Heer’s film seemed to be positing guilt as a legitimate and productive lens through which Australia’s frontier pasts could (and perhaps should) be viewed; this was the film’s answer to the question of what to do with this past. The Tracker was an example of what Mark Golub has termed the genre of “redemption histories” – historical films which set out to be explicitly anti-racist, giving those marginalised the chance to tell their stories (Golub 23). For Golub, redemption histories function as substitutes for actual political work, with “the simple fact of attendance... assuaging white liberal guilt and reducing politics to the purchase of one more commodity” (31). In Golub’s analysis, redemption histories seek to take responsibility for the political work of the audience, enabling easy contrition.
It is certainly possible to consider *The Tracker* in this light, leading to the conclusion that the film undertook a type of ‘guilt work’ that ensured viewers would no longer have to do anything themselves. Likewise, the film could be seen as an easy version of the history of colonisation: “the bad whites are punished, the well-meaning whites are educated...and the noble Aboriginal is freed”, as Jane Lydon put it (140). The film’s uncritical affirmation of apologies in and of themselves, and the reconciliation process more generally, also ignored completely their potential problems. As Haydie Gooder and Jane Jacobs have argued, postcolonial apologies can be read as a way for settlers to resuscitate a “legitimate sense of belonging” in the face of the “unsettling” nature of admissions of past wrongs (243). If, as Gooder and Jacobs’ analysis suggested, apologies are about settler-belonging, they leave little space for justice, responsibility or forgiveness, in this film or elsewhere.

Nevertheless, *The Tracker’s* depiction of guilt on the frontier performed an important political function at a time when many sought to comprehensively dismiss notions of guilt, blame, or responsibility in the contemplation of the calamitous consequences of Australia’s colonisation. As Martha Augoustinos and Amanda LeCouteur noted, the notion of collective or white guilt had been “repudiated” at a political level in Australia at the time of the film’s release (237). *The Tracker* explicitly challenged this repudiation, insisting instead that guilt, blame, and responsibility are not only possible, but also imperative to contemporary understandings and negotiations of this past.

Moreover, *The Tracker’s* guilt, it seems to me, was not ‘settling’. It was not a version of guilt that offered an unproblematic or uncomplicated way of ‘moving on’ from the violence and injustice of Australia’s past; nor did the film seem particularly interested in the subsequent re-valorisation of the non-Indigenous Australian nation or its projects of national belonging. Instead, the film ends in ambivalence. *The Tracker*, as Fiona Probyn has argued, “does not leave us in any easy, reconciled, political space”. Whilst the Tracker rides towards his country, the Follower is left behind, an ending that is “difficult to read with any certainty” according to Probyn. “I think this is partly the point of leaving the Follower where he is; stopped, slowed right down so that we don’t know where he’ll go from there” (Probyn).

Regardless of where the Follower and the Tracker are headed in the aftermath of the film’s final frames – and it seems important that, at film’s end at least, these two characters are separated – it is guilt that has directed their journeys. *The Tracker* narrated a history of the frontier through a guilty lens, demonstrating the possibility that guilt in and about this past might lead to restorative justice for Australia’s Indigenous peoples. In post-Apology Australia – the newly-elected Rudd government’s first parliamentary act was an Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples in February 2008 – it is easy to miss the significance of this film’s intervention into a larger set of debates around what to do with the history and legacy of Australia’s colonisation. But even now, with the sorry debates apparently concluded, *The Tracker* has something to say about the ongoing negotiation of this past. The Follower’s apology, as I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, takes place around a third of the way into the film. Although an important moment, this apology, by itself, does not guarantee the Follower’s survival. Indeed, the Veteran’s apology to the Tracker, made as he is forced by the Fanatic to attach a chain to the Tracker’s neck, does not enable his survival.
Apologising, then, was only the Follower’s first step towards contrition; it was his actions in the aftermath that mattered most.

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