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Mad Max as Australian gothic: don't leave the road if you want to survive

Ben Wilkie

What happens when white settlers leave the road, and give in to the call of the outback? This is the question that defines Australian film's darker moments

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In nearly all Australian films, and certainly all Australian film and literature in the gothic mode, the landscape is more than a stage upon which the story unfolds. It has agency, and becomes almost a character in the drama. The rural outback holds sinister possibilities of madness, depravity, and profound loss.

Mad Max: Fury Road taps into this gothic tradition of Australian storytelling that extends as far back as Marcus Clarke’s colonial masterpiece, For The Term Of His Natural Life, and threads through Australian film classics such as Wake In Fright and Picnic At Hanging Rock, and more recent works like Wolf Creek.

This tradition sets human characters against the omnipresent Australian landscape; their identity and very existence is frequently defined in relation to an often foreboding, unwelcoming land that violently opposes their presence. They are out of place, and they do not belong here.

So it is with Fury Road, which in many ways has more in common with the comparatively gentle landscape of Picnic At Hanging Rock – in which an ancient, timeless land at first seduces but ultimately subsumes three lead characters – than with other works of dystopian science fiction.

There’s little doubt that the emphatic nature of land in Australian film is a product of our history. As Manning Clark put it in 1988, “no human being can ever know heart’s ease in a foreign land, because in a foreign land there live foreign spirits. We white people are condemned to live in a foreign country where we have no ancestral spirits”.

Although settler Australians seem less inclined to fully accept the displacement that their claims to this land necessitate, the profound discomfort of colonial dispossession has saturated our stories. Even films that are, like Mad Max, not ostensibly about colonialism, tend to incorporate this tradition in their narratives.

Settlers here can survive, but they can never truly belong. They cannot stake a claim: they must keep moving and, in Fury Road, move they do.

The Mad Max films bring into focus one element of settler society in Australia that others
in the gothic tradition tend to overlook: that ancient symbol of civilisation, the road. Set against the outback, blacktops are at once remnants of a society that has fallen and reminders that perhaps it never belonged there in the first place.

These highways, or what’s left of them, have an uncanny, otherworldly presence in and on the landscape, an existence more profound because of the conspicuous lack of identifiable artefacts of western society beyond cars, black bitumen, and petrol.

Though deeply out of place, roads are nonetheless familiar and comforting: in Mad Max, they hold the promise of safe passage and survival – and, maybe, the prospect of escape from the hostile landscape waiting on either side of the bitumen.

As the desert wasteland of Mad Max’s post-apocalypse Australia whips past, we are reminded of Joseph Conrad’s Heart Of Darkness:

*Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you - smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out.*

Australia’s gothic tradition imagines what it might be like to give in to this call. In Wolf Creek, the hapless tourists stray farther from the road and enter the deranged, psychotic world of Mick Taylor, who embodies the terror and violence of the Australian landscape. They are tortured and murdered merely for being there.

In the final scenes, some hope: a sole survivor finds her way back to the highway, a beacon of safety and civilisation.

In the Mad Max franchise, survival and existence is likewise predicated on the cars and roads that tell of futile attempts to bring order to an otherwise unwelcoming and formidable outback; that the “roads” of Fury Road are barely even there furthers a sense of unease.

For Australian audiences, most of which are white, middle-class and urban, the rural landscape often holds an unfathomable darkness. The highway and the car, on the other hand, represent security, freedom, and prosperity.

As we traverse the outback upon these artificial pathways, our greatest fear is that we will become lost, stranded, or our lifeline - the petrol that fuels our vehicles - will disappear. In depicting a society at war over that precious liquid, it is precisely the fear of having to face our last great adversary, an unforgiving landscape from which we settlers are alienated, that the Mad Max films have always recognised.

Though the colonial origins of this discomfort are muted, Mad Max’s position within the Australian gothic tradition is undeniable. The original Mad Max films appeared at a time when Australia filmmakers were beginning to explore the deeper, more uncomfortable consequences of attempting to forge a sense of national identity in a former British colony.

We still face such problems, but Fury Road has emerged from a quite different context: George Miller’s new film amplifies the landscape tradition for a global audience that’s not necessarily receptive of its deeper meanings.
The success of Fury Road can easily be put down to the simple fact that it’s two hours of ridiculous fun. But it also echoes an obsession with landscape, and the metaphorical and literal road in Australian films more generally.

Miller reminds us that our storytelling as a settler society has been fundamentally shaped by the complicated task of finding belonging and security in a land that seems profoundly opposed to our being here.

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