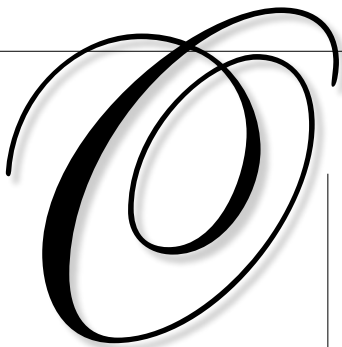




'CROCODILE DUNDEE' OR THE CROC(K) OF GOLD



fto

1931-2005

FILM
& TEXT

BRIAN
McFARLANE

n Being Very, Very Popular

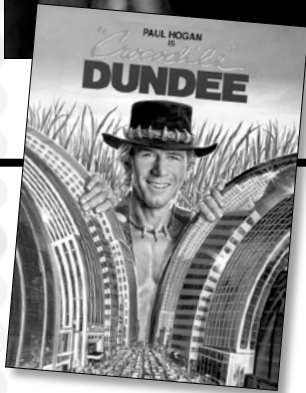
Whatever else there is to be said about *Crocodile Dundee* (Peter Faiman, 1986), there is no getting away from its sensational popularity. It made the most money at Australian box offices ever, displacing *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), and overseas it broke the records for Australian films previously established by *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and *The Man from Snowy River* (George Miller, 1982). In approaching the film as a text, it may be useful to start by asking why the film has been so popular, keeping in mind that film is an industry as well

as an art form and that there is no point in shutting our eyes to matters of commerce in relation to an art form so capital-intensive.

A few years ago I was teaching a course on 'Popular Narrative Fictions'. The course worked its way through ballads belonging to the oral tradition, crime fictions of the nineteenth century, science fiction and detective stories of the twentieth, and it seemed logical to end the course with film, the supremely popular narrative fiction of the twentieth century. The films chosen were Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), as an example of the work of the

blockbuster filmmaker *par excellence*, and, nearer to home, *Crocodile Dundee*. They were chosen not because they were necessarily critical favourites (though each had a share of complimentary reviews) but because, in pulling such huge crowds, they were clearly answering mass needs.

As phenomenon and industry product, then, *Crocodile Dundee* is undoubtedly important. It is not easy to gain reliable figures about box-office takings, but for what they are worth the statistics quoted by the website IMDb claim that the film, reputed to have cost less than US\$10



million to make, had taken US\$174,803,506 in the US by 1987, and US\$360 million worldwide by the same date.¹ These figures far out-rank those for *Mad Max* or *The Man From Snowy River*, which had been hailed for their success in taking new Australian cinema to off-shore audiences. There were reports of crowds scrambling for seats at the huge Leicester Square cinema in London, where the grateful distributors were said to be thinking of changing their name to 20th Century Crocs. And when the (dismal) sequel, *Crocodile Dundee II* (John Cornell, 1988) had its Los Angeles premiere in early 1988, it made round-

the-world news as the stars turned out in force.

Dundee himself, Paul Hogan, said at the time of the film's release: 'It's no good making, as some people described it before seeing it, a send-up of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You can't compete with Hollywood money on that sort of thing.' Well, if it couldn't compete with *Raiders* money as to *input*, it certainly did so at the other end of the production-distribution spectrum. In trying to account for the popularity of *Crocodile Dundee* we may make some headway in understanding how it works and why it is as it is. The sorts of figures referred to above make clear that this is not an art-house cult success reaching segmented audiences but a big multiplex job. And what most often succeeds in the latter is usually a film of one kind

or other – action adventure, science-fiction, gangster films, epics, family comedies and so on. The very idea of 'genre' suggests a coalescing of proven ingredients, re-jigged to provide another airing in which the familiar provides reassurance and the unexpected elements maintain our curiosity. I'll return shortly to genre elements at work in *Crocodile Dundee*: at this point I want just to signal their importance to the film's popular reception.

A Very Australian Hero?

LET us consider first what sort of hero Mick Dundee is, and in this respect it won't be possible to separate him from the persona Paul Hogan had already created in his television appearances. First, though, if we compare

him with such American film heroes of the period as Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) or Rambo or Rocky (both Sylvester Stallone),² it is true to say that Dundee is as physically brave but that he is not a hulk. He has more humour than those American heroes, and this no doubt derives from audience expectations of Hogan. Mick has a reputation for courage: indeed his nickname, 'Crocodile', is a salute to past exploits, though we're never sure how far he has burnished his own legendary status. However, when he tells the American reporter, Sue, about his famous escapade, there is a likeably self-deprecating touch. In the space of the film's plot (i.e., how the events of the story are presented on the screen), we do see him facing up to the kangaroo-shooters, killing a snake and dealing with a mugger in New York, so that

He knows how to promote and maintain his own legend, but has little idea of social organization, as his response to class matters in New York suggests.



it is not just a matter of having to accept his reputation on the basis of the 'pre-film' run-in with a croc.

Mick's sense of humour, then, may be myth-deflating but he *does* act like a hero just the same. He is innocent but not naive: he may not know what a transvestite is, but he can spot a phoney, like Sue's fiancé Richard. He is shrewd but not sophisticated: for example, he knows how to promote and maintain his own legend, but has little idea of social organization, as his response to class matters in New York suggests. It is perhaps arguable that the film is not wholly consistent about the degree of his naivety: in this respect, consider his dealings with the transvestite Gwendoline, whom he treats with swift brutality, and with the two prostitutes whose pimp he knocks out. Is he

simply confused about any but the most conventional relationships between men and women, or has the screenplay (by Hogan, producer John Cornell, and Ken Shadie) not really thought through the extent and nature of Mick's innocence and/or ignorance of the world?

He is a peculiarly Australian hero; there is absolutely no question of his nationality. A *New York Times* reviewer wrote at the time of the film's release:

... he seems to represent the newly proud Australian, the man who doesn't apologise for not being born English, who relishes his own, very pronounced, classless accent and vocabulary, and who celebrates skepticism and the old frontier values



almost simultaneously.³

To Australians, he is perhaps less likely to recall 'old frontier heroes', of the kind celebrated by, say, James Fenimore Cooper or Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn*, or of myriad Western movies, than the heroes of bush ballads, such as 'The Man from Snowy River'. He's like a descendant of the brave, leathery, good-humoured bushman, with a touch of the larrikin about him, but he's seen 'em come and go in the years since Banjo Paterson. He knows about tourists and how to give them their money's worth – and to fool them at the same time. In some ways, this combination seems more essentially Australian than the simple manly virtues celebrated in 'The Man from Snowy River', either as poem or (deeply stupid) film. As a hero, Mick Dundee is a simple, tough, decent bloke, more knowing than he sometimes lets on, who attracts a more sophisticated woman and wins her over – and away from her city-bred fiancé. And there is a whole tradition of Hollywood male-centred narrative behind this scenario.

The Narrative Package

HOGAN memorably claimed that with *Crocodile Dundee* he wanted to make a 'proper movie', 'as opposed to the Australian "arty" films he so despises',⁴ and with this in mind he is not doing anything very original in terms of screen narrative. He is really conforming to a narrative structure to which classic Hollywood cinema had long habituated audiences. For instance, recalling a long

tradition of westerns, from *My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946) to *McCabe and Mrs Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971) and *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, 1985), the film has a hero who starts with a reputation that is part-true, part-myth; he fascinates an intrepid girl who, at first, is ready to be sceptical about his prowess; she succumbs to his rough-hewn charms after seeing him effortlessly dominate in his own – and in her – territory; he tends to make opposing males look merely ordinary as he and the girl head for the inevitable ending.

She, on the other hand, has to subdue her own independence (feminists, where were you when the box offices of the world were doing such a roaring trade in 1986?); she has to be seen to need his protection, to come to value his simpler approach to life, her independence having only got her into danger and dodgy company. 'You wouldn't last five minutes on your own. This is a man's country,' Mick tells Sue early on; and, towards the film's end, in the evening streets of New York when Mick despatches a mugger, she reinforces his superiority by telling him: 'I'm all right when I'm with you, Dundee. Why do you always make me feel like Jane in the Tarzan comics?' Hollywood genre movies, westerns, comedies and others have been endemically structured about women subduing their intelligence and aggressive instincts in the interests of maintaining the concept of male rightness in important matters.

However, it is also built into

the film's narrative structure that she (like Indiana Jones's girlfriend) must prove herself a 'good bloke' and a survivor in the world of outback Australia. Compare this with what's asked of Mick in New York: he just cuts everybody down to size, and effortlessly too. There's an interesting comparison here with the famous Frank Capra social comedy-dramas, *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), in which the heroes are played by Gary Cooper and James Stewart respectively. In these two film classics, rural innocence teaches city slickers a thing or two, maintaining integrity in the process, just as Dundee does in the face of all the corruptions of New York. As a narrative, then, *Crocodile Dundee* fits easily into the genre of comedy-adventure, moving irresistibly towards the expected heterosexual romantic finale. This recognizable genre pattern may very well be a key element in the film's huge success. This is not a quirky, one-off art-house film, but one which offers in structural terms a narrative package with the pleasures of expectations usually gratified.

The Look of Things

... or to give it its proper name, iconography. Just as reassuring as the structures discussed above is the way the film reinforces its popular narrative moves with equally popular visual representations. The two are inseparable in dictating our responses to the film. To take the people first: Hogan, from his TV show to his Australian tourism ads telling us to 'throw another shrimp on the barbie', has been an icon

of lean, bronzed Australian manhood, and as Dundee he's dressed to stress his lithe musculature, with sleeveless leather jacket and all-Australian akubra. Linda Kozlowski as Sue is equally an icon of pretty, sexy womanhood, dressed in ways that emphasize the conventional fetishization of the female body in films. Think, as one example, of her bathing costume. The other characters signify Australian-ness in simple ways: Wally, 'Mr Dundee's business partner', is all sly courtliness in long white socks and safari suit; Ida's peroxide-blond, hard-bitten barmaid is a stereotype of many Australian films. And others signify Americanness: Richard and Sue's father, in their designer suits, incarnate two versions of big-business, big-city success; and the other Manhattan types, like the coke-sniffer, the pimp and the prostitutes, the party phoneys and the black driver Clarence announce their character functions initially in visual terms.

As for the iconographic representation of places, there is above all the obvious contrast of rural Australia and the urban mayhem of New York. Australia is a matter of the clean, clear outback, with great vistas of mountains, plains and rivers (remember the sudden cut at the film's start from New York to Walkabout Creek; a blunt statement of opposition indeed). It is also a place of crude pubs, the rundown Never Never Safari van, and there is a sense of its prevailing emptiness, the sparsity of human life and its signs. (I'll return in a moment to what this kind of visual account of Australia

suggests about the filmmakers' sense of their audience.) New York is a place of perpetual smog, skyscrapers, jostling crowds, limousines, posh hotels and bars. The contrast of the two locations is reinforced constantly in iconographic terms – in, for instance, such specific opposites as the outback camp and the Manhattan hotel suite.

Everything about the film's structural and iconographic packaging – the way the plot's action is structured and how it looks as it is put before us – caters to accepted notions about the way mainstream films are put together. It also caters to how we as Australians like to think of ourselves (and others), and, given the film's international success, how others like to think of Australia. This leads me inevitably to my next contention about the film's all-conquering popularity.

A Very Conservative Film

CROCODILE *Dundee* is absolutely a film of the 1980s. Think of such other hugely popular successes as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Rambo: First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), *E.T.*, *Three Men and a Baby* (Leonard Nimoy, 1987), or *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) at the end of the decade. These belong to very different genres, but what they have in common is that each reinforces rather than interrogates the dominant values of the period, perhaps as a reaction against the more radical 70s. It's of course dangerous to think of decades in this rather arbitrary way: it's

just a sort of ready-reckoner for the mind. However, I do wonder how many films that are really radical in relation to the prevailing mores, which usually means middle-class mores in Western democracies, have been wildly popular. One that leaps to mind is *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969), that drug- and sex-fuelled road-movie that unexpectedly galvanized a vast cinema-going audience and not just the stoned and the stropky.

Nevertheless, that is probably an exception to a working rule that the most popular films are so *because* they are conservative, because they comfort and confirm rather than disturb and distress. Look at some of the specific ways in which *Crocodile Dundee* fits this paradigm. First, as suggested above, in narrative terms it belongs absolutely to the models laid down by classical Hollywood cinema, and more particularly to the structures of the comedy-adventure genre. Second, in its representation of sexual relationships it follows the well-worn path on which the choices available to the independent, intelligent Sue are narrowed down to the creep Richard and the sub-macho Mick. You might well speculate on how Sue and Mick will occupy the long winter evenings of their life together; not, probably, in conversation anyway. Think too of the rough treatment of women at the party. This is not to imply that *Dundee* is a misogynist film, only that it endorses the most clichéd attitudes to male-female relationships. Producer/co-screenwriter Cornell and director Peter Faiman seem to be entirely at home with

the notion that Australian men are real men – and once again women are thankful for it.

Third, the fairytale ending couldn't be more conservative. The foregoing comments about gender relationships are really irrelevant, because at the end of *Crocodile Dundee* we are just required to *accept* that the prince has found his princess and triumphed over obstacles in his path. (Vladimir Propp's famous analysis of folktales would have had no trouble in accommodating this film – nor the film his narrative taxonomy.)⁵ In the final scene on the crowded New York subway platform, messages of love are relayed by waiting passengers, and Mick literally tramples over anyone who comes between him and his princess. Again, it needs to be noted that the film is working in a genre in which romantic consummation is the goal (you might recall Richard Gere as the knight climbing the fire escape to rescue his princess at the end of *Pretty Woman*). Audiences will not usually be pleased to find the male and female leads in such films walking off in different directions, both literally and metaphorically.

The film is also very conservative in the ways it responds to aspects of the prevailing ideology. There are jokes about prostitutes and transvestites (crudely masculinist these jokes are too), about muggers and drug-users, and blacks. Any one of these groups of people might have been supposed, by the mid-1980s, to have gone beyond the realm of mere stereotype, but not so

in *Crocodile Dundee*. Take blacks for example: Gulpillil's Nev (and the very name, with its characteristic Oz abbreviation and its seeming distance from Aboriginal life, seems intended to be read as comically out-of-whack) is a black who finds tribal life 'a drag' and is prepared to mock it. Clarence, the New York hotel doorman, who becomes Mick's devoted supporter, is not 'tribal', he tells Mick in reply to his question. All right, one can be too earnest and humourless, but it's hard not to discern an easy-going, careless white racism in such moments.

There is nothing disturbing in either the narrative moves or ideological stances of the film – unless one chooses to read back 'across the grain' to consider what insights are being suppressed in this parade of stereotypes. Like, for instance, the *real* plight of Aborigines in Australia, or the *real* suppression of women in male-dominated Oz mythologies.

Advance Australian Fair

Crocodile Dundee gives vast Australian audiences the images of Australia which they like, and represents us to the world at large in ways we like to be represented and ways in which the world likes to imagine us. One writer felt that it created 'what the world thinks we do best – cracking jokes, eating bush tucker and being basically naïve to technology and the culture of the civilised world'.⁶ Visually, the film can't resist the beauty of the outback: it lingers over sunsets and sunrises, over lovely vistas 'of sweeping plains/ Of ragged mountain ranges' as

Dorothea Mackellar celebrated in her poem 'My Country'. We need to consider the status of this footage. Much of it seems little more than like a travelogue in its effect, lacking serious dramatic function. Anyway, it's what Sue and we are encouraged to value – and it is of course meant to be physically superior to New York.

Psychologically, the film both espouses our national myths and slyly undercuts them. That is, it satisfies our chauvinism at the same time as letting us think we're on to this and not taken in by it. We come out on top either way. The cutting-down-to-size humour is seen as enough in the way of critique of the national psyche. For example, the Australian male image

is seen as a subject for humour in the first half, *but* Mick is also a hero and this is reinforced in the New York half, where no other man is remotely his peer. In ideological terms the film plays up the comfortable notion that the outback is the repository of Australian virtues, while cities are the scene of vulgar competitiveness, myriad corruptions and falsities. Never mind that Australia is one of the most urbanized countries in the world.

Ultimately, I am torn between the idea that *Crocodile Dundee* is peddling a wildly outdated vision of Australia and the fact that the film is made with great skill. It is slickly accomplished and good-humoured in its superficial way, even if it is little more

than a series of episodes – sketches really – strung loosely together. It centres on a hero we're meant to identify with and it means to keep us so preoccupied that we won't have time to ask troubling questions. The questions to leave you with include: Are you happy to accept this soothing view? Are its images of Australia 'true' to your concepts? And whatever one may feel about such issues, there is no denying the importance of international success in establishing a national cinema. Should we just settle for the idea that everyone knows about *Crocodile Dundee*, and be glad?

Endnotes

¹ See www.imdb.com. Also, Victor Davis, 'The \$350m

Kid Knowall', *The Herald*, 14 January 1987.

² It might be instructive, too, to compare him with recent heroes exhibited in epics such as *Troy* and *Alexander*, or in comic-strip films such as *Spider-man* and *Batman Begins*. Different periods create/require different heroes.

³ Nina Darnton, 'Crocodile Dundee', *New York Times*, 26 September 1986.

⁴ Geoff Mayer, 'Crocodile Dundee', in Brian McFarlane *et al* (eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1999, p.90.

⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), trans. Laurence Scott, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1968.

⁶ Ramona Barry, 'Learning to walk all over again', *Overland*, 1994, No. 135, p.9.