Alexandra Heller-Nicholas looks at how two Australian films, *The Tunnel* and *Lake Mungo*, fit into the hugely popular found-footage horror trend, and what they can reveal about this often critically disregarded subgenre.
When horror academic Mark Jancovich dismissed *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) as ‘a one-off gimmick rather than the start of a new cycle of horror production’ in 2002, few suspected how premature this prediction would be. The extraordinarily successful *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007–2012) left *Blair Witch* in its dust, and found footage – or faux found footage – has become the horror format *du jour*. Horror fans and critics now discuss found footage as an overused cliché that is past its use-by date, and even horror directors themselves go to considerable lengths to clarify how their found-footage effort deviates from what has now become the norm.

In the few instances where found-footage horror is not dismissed as a contemporary fad, a whistlestop tour of its historical precedents locates its origins somewhere among Orson Welles’ notorious 1938 radio broadcast of HG Wells’ novel *The War of the Worlds*, Ruggero Deodato’s equally controversial *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and the *Blair Witch* sensation. In reality, of course, film history is rarely so tidy. The roots of found-footage horror can be traced back to a number of screen trends and events, including the graphic road-safety training films of the 1950s and 1960s; the burst of fictional movies about the supposed reality of ‘snuff’ films, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s; the mockumentaries *The Legend of Bigfoot* (Harry Winer, 1976) and *Man Bites Dog* (André Bonzel et al., 1992); television series such as Leonard Nimoy’s *In Search of* … (1976–1982) and Jean-Teddy Filippe’s *Les Documents interdits* that screened around the world – including in Australia on SBS’s cult series *Eat Carpet* – throughout the late 1980s and 1990s; as well as the shocking 1992 British television Halloween hoax *Ghostwatch*. Looking beyond film, television and radio, there are numerous significant media hoaxes such as the *New York Sun*’s ‘Great Moon Hoax’ in 1835 that suggest a broader history behind the current found-footage horror phenomenon.

While the diversity of this subgenre’s history has been simplified, the broader areas from which found-footage horror has drawn its inspiration have also largely understated. Documentary is the most obvious, but found-footage horror’s relationship to amateur filmmaking traditions is arguably just as important. One of the most intriguing features of this found-footage phenomenon is that it actively seeks to blur the lines between amateur and professional filmmaking. The surface deception of these films is, of course, that we are watching ‘real’ footage, often recut in the context of a ‘real’ documentary. But running alongside this is a dual trick: often we are encouraged to believe we are looking at amateur filmmaking, when in fact we are looking at a highly polished studio product. Additionally, it is often difficult in the finished products to distinguish which ‘faked’ footage is a ‘real’ low-budget, amateur product, and which is ‘faked fake
amateur’ footage. This Baudrillardian tangle may pose a dense riddle when phrased in this way, but becomes clearer when comparing the first independently produced film in the Paranormal Activity franchise (Oren Peli, 2007) with Paranormal Entity (Shane Van Dyke, 2009), a knock-off by ‘mockbuster’ production company The Asylum to profit on Paranormal Activity’s success. Although one is supposedly ‘authentic’ and the other an ‘imitation’, the films materially have little that distinguishes them in form and content. As the earlier low-budget found-footage horror success of The Blair Witch Project proved, if anything can be said about this subgenre it is that it encourages both amateurs and professional filmmakers, and can accommodate large and small budgets alike, from Cloverfield’s (Matt Reeves, 2008) US$25 million right down to Paranormal Activity’s oft-cited US$15,000.

Critical considerations of the current found-footage horror oeuvre tend to focus on the more highly publicised mainstream cinema-released titles: Blair Witch, the Paranormal Activity, The Last Exorcism and [REC] franchises, and The Devil Inside (William Brent Bell, 2012). However, there are a staggering number of lesser-known titles that have been released since Blair Witch, and while these films do not share a singular or unified ideological vision, they offer a particularly strong instance where formal construction can be linked explicitly to a film’s ideology. Through their deployment of a found-footage structure, the two Australian found-footage films Lake Mungo (Joel Anderson, 2008) and The Tunnel (Carlo Ledesma, 2011) illustrate this point in surprisingly diverse ways.

Lake Mungo is a tightly constructed analysis of the role of gender politics in the broader dynamics of the heteronormative Australian family unit, and its reliance upon the found-footage conceit is fundamental to its central thematic investigation.

In Metro number 161, Rjurik Davidson celebrated Lake Mungo as evidence of how strong Australian genre film can be when allowed to flourish, and in Metro number 167, Myke Bartlett’s consideration of The Tunnel emphasised its cutting-edge distribution model – its producers themselves made the movie freely available on file-sharing websites including The Pirate Bay. Of less note has been how both films have worked their (supposedly) found material into the mockumentary format, then recut it into a documentary-style format – a tradition again typified by The Blair Witch Project. Both Lake Mungo and The Tunnel utilise a range of different types of found visual materials: after-the-fact interviews, home movies, surveillance and CCTV footage, and even still photographs. While formally similar, however, these two films deploy a found-footage structure with notably diverse intent. While both films manifest at the intersection of diegetic camera aesthetics and the mockumentary, they do so with an eye on notably different ideological motives.

The politics of home video: Lake Mungo

At its core, Lake Mungo is an exploration of a mother and daughter who – after the death of the latter – struggle to resolve their relationship issues in an environment defined by masculine attempts at control (especially through the use of home video technology). Unlike other family found-footage horror films such as Apartment 143 (Carles Torrens, 2011) or Home Movie (Christopher Denham, 2008), Lake Mungo does this without relying on demonising anyone, and instead finds the source of its horror in the mysteries that surround its central deceased protagonist. Recalling David Lynch’s cult television series Twin Peaks (1990–1991) in many ways, Lake Mungo begins with the death of seemingly wholesome teen Alice Palmer (Talia Zucker). It is via the fallout from this tragedy that her dark secrets are exposed, prompting serious reflection by both her family and her small community of Ararat more broadly. After she drowns in a local dam, both strangers and her family members see Alice on numerous occasions, and in response her brother, Mathew (Martin Sharpe), installs cameras around their house in the hope of capturing these supernatural appearances. The evidence he finds brings national media...
attention to the family and their unusual plight. Along with local psychic Ray (Steve Jodrell), Mathew, his father, Russell (David Pledger) and mother, June (Rosie Traynor) not only work through their grief by investigating Alice’s troubled last months, but are also forced to address the notion of ‘truth’ on a more fundamental and personal level.

Mathew provides the bulk of the filmic material in Lake Mungo. Crucially, the choice to record these events is explicitly his: he is a confused teen who is both mourning the sudden death of his beloved sister, as well as dealing with his parents’ grief. In one of the film’s first major twists, it is exposed that Mathew has faked the initial footage showing Alice’s ghost for reasons that are unclear to his family but that appear to be related to him wanting to give his parents a tangible link to Alice to soothe their grief. Although his motives are not malign, Mathew seeks to control his sister and her memory through technology. But his attempt to do this fails through the exposure of his fraudulent foot- age, and while he inadvertently succeeds in capturing evidence of a flesh-and-blood intruder in their house (a discovery that leads to the exposure of one of Alice’s most shocking secrets – her sexual relationship with her adult neighbours), regardless of how well-intentioned his hoax it ultimately distracts the family from the fact that Alice’s real ghost has returned to them with her own mission.

It is this desire on Alice’s part that provides the film’s central thematic core regarding the relationship between Alice and her mother. Technology plays a crucial role in this pursuit of repairing the bond between them, but it is not one – despite Mathew’s best intentions – that can be dominated by male action or motives. Curiously, Ray’s video interviews with both June and Alice before she died, in which the women are allowed to speak honestly for themselves, hold valuable information that propels the female healing at the heart of the film. Ray does not control these interviews, but facilitates them: he provides the women with an intimate space in which to voice their fears and concerns. When considering the gendering of technology in this way, it is significant that the film’s revealing climax at Lake Mungo itself draws a distinct parallel between Alice holding the camera, and the chilling exposure of the mystery that haunted her to her early grave. Alice understands that technology can expose things best not seen, and rather seeking to dominate it, she instead chooses to reject it – literally to bury it. Lake Mungo is a tightly constructed analysis of the role of gender politics in the broader dynamics of the heteronormative Australian family unit, and its reliance upon the found-}

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**History through the gut: The Tunnel**

In The Tunnel, young and ambitious journalist Natasha Warner (Bel Delìa) finds herself under increasing pressure in her new job on a current affairs program to come up with an impressive story. This pressure is compounded by visible sexual harassment from a number of her work colleagues; her male crew see her as a pretty face with little professional ability to back it up. Furthermore, the added complication of a recent (unexplained) failure now puts her job at risk. Natasha sees an investigation into the New South Wales government’s mysteriously shelved plans to turn the railway tunnels under the Sydney CBD into a water reservoir as just the scoop she needs to save her career. Desperate and alienated from her colleagues, she lies to her already-suspicious male crewmembers – cameraman Steve (Steve Miller), producer Pete (Andy Rodoreda) and sound recorder Jim ‘Tangles’ Williams (Luke Arnold) – telling them they have permission from their boss to enter the tunnels to investigate rumours that many of the homeless people who live in these underground tunnels have mysteriously vanished. Finding much more than she expected, Natasha is dramatically exposed as a terrifying and violent mutant terrorises her and the crew, leaving only her and Steve as survivors.

For non-Australian audiences in particular, outside of the recognisable accent and references to Sydney, there is seemingly little in the urban setting of The Tunnel that flags it as particularly specific to the Australian context. But this film explicitly hinges upon the exposure of a hidden alternative history that is literally buried underneath Sydney, and in relation to the Australian ‘history wars’ this central concern flags it as a powerful allegorical rendering of some of the issues that permeated this emotionally charged political debate. In this context, the attempt to rewrite Australian history (and the suppres- sion of that alternative history) at the heart of The Tunnel can be understood as fundamen- tally political. The schism that polarised political discourse since the early 1990s in Australia was so fixated on the challenge of constructing a historical narrative to white Australia that it defined the ideological differences between the country’s two major political parties. While these history wars were concerned with the subjective writing of Australian history in relation to European settlement and the treatment of Indigenous Australians, these debates often expanded to encompass issues of national identity and the nature of ‘Australianness’ itself.

While the history wars were steeped in the fallibility of written history, there is little debate that 1992 was a defining moment for Australia. The High Court’s judgement in Mabo v the State of Queensland (No. 2) (1992) (the ‘Mabo decision’) was a watershed political event that triggered a broader crisis in the national psyche. This case was the culmination of years of legal and social debate concerning the land rights of Indigenous Australians. The belief of terra nullius – that Australia was empty land when European settlers arrived – provided the foundations of how white Australia had viewed its presence in the country for 200 years. For non-Indigenous Australians, the nation’s story was spawned from the fact that the land was discovered, not invaded; the Mabo decision shattered this foundation of white Australia’s comprehension of its own past.
The history wars were immediately politicised after the Mabo decision, and in 1992 Labor prime minister Paul Keating activated its rhetoric in his famous Redfern Park speech that while rousing, was far from unanimously hailed. Beyond the spirit of charity it purportedly espoused, Keating’s opponents – particularly the conservative Liberal leader, John Howard – viewed the speech as an attempt to politicise history. It was in this climate that the history wars became a powerful weapon in Howard’s political lexicon. With the nation’s leading political figures mobilised on opposing sides, by the mid 1990s the history wars had taraformed the Australian political landscape: history was no navel-gazing exercise confined to the nation’s elite tertiary institutions. Rather, it affected the day-to-day construction of policy that governed contemporary Australian life.

When Howard became prime minister in 1996, he defined the debates within the history wars as an academic indulgence of an elite class of bourgeois intellectuals who stood in direct opposition to Howard’s ‘Aussie battlers’. Keating may have opened the door to the politicisation of history at Redfern Park in 1992, but it was Howard who transformed public anxieties about history into potent political cannon fodder. But the election of Labor’s Kevin Rudd as prime minister in 2007 heralded another generational shift in the history wars when as his first official act of government he apologised to the Stolen Generations. While far from over, the terms that have governed the history wars have significantly altered since this point.

Whether consciously or not, it is in this context that The Tunnel can be understood as articulating ideas around competing historical narratives and official government involvement in those narratives, and as such it presents a fertile example of the history wars’ conceptual mechanics being rendered into horror-based allegory. It too deals with repressed histories: the desire of some to expose them, and the conflicting denial of others who steadfastly maintain that these alternatives do not even exist. The film makes clear on a number of occasions that the government is directly responsible for the conspiracy designed to hide the truth of what lies buried under the centre of the most populous city in the country, but its critique stems back much further than the specific government officials it shows in a selection of news bites in its opening scenes. That the titular tunnels are located underneath Hyde Park highlights the importance of colonisation on its internally conflicting histories: named after London’s Hyde Park, this was a playground and recreational centre for national authority figures in particular.

Crucially, an intertitle at the film’s conclusion indicates that ‘the police investigation was closed due to “contradictory evidence”’, and that ‘despite several requests, no State Government or Police representative agreed to be interviewed for this film’.

Though the film is formally reliant on the original hand-held (‘found’) footage of the crew and structured through one-on-one interviews, this latter statement is fundamental in defining mockumentary itself as a political mechanism, which in this case has sought to expose the literally buried histories of the tunnels underneath Hyde Park – a space linked to a vision of colonial history imbued with pleasure and recreation. The Tunnel is an investigation into the demons that lurk in Australia’s history – one that has been rejected because of its inability to fit into a dominant or authorised historical narrative. It is therefore significant that what terrifies Natasha, Steve, Tangles and Pete is not a zombie or a vampire or Lovecraftian sea monster, but a mutant: if the return of the repressed lies at the heart of the horror film, as Robin Wood has previously suggested, then what reaches out to torment white Australians in The Tunnel is a literal mutation of the official desire to bury unwanted histories.

From this perspective, the formal construction of The Tunnel as a found-footage-based mockumentary renders it a powerful and fascinating instance of allegorical self-reflection, typifying Adam Lowenstein’s definition of horror as ‘a return to history through the gut’. Similarly, Lake Mungo reconfigures the gendering of the gaze’s power through hand-held consumer-grade video technology. By doing so, it provides a context for its investigation into the long-lasting damage caused by gender imbalances within the Australian nuclear family, even after death. Found-footage horror is surely another in a long line of the genre’s zeitgeist-defining popular fads, but deep in its formal construction exists a perhaps surprising cultural potency and capacity for national self-reflection.

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Endnotes

