While *The Tender Hook* is an evocative and beautifully shot noir film, it privileges style over substance, writes Brian McFarlane.
WE ARE NOT INVITED to view Jonathan Ogilvie’s *The Tender Hook* (2008) as a realist recreation of time past – or indeed of the place where the film is meant to be set. If you haven’t twigged to this earlier, you’ll realize it when Hugo Weaving as McHeath sings the 1988 Leonard Cohen classic ‘I’m Your Man’ in his Sydney jazz age nightclub. The film takes Cohen’s plangent hymn to love (‘If you want a lover, I’ll do anything you ask me to’) and gives it a jazz setting, in the process both referencing the earlier period and adverting to a sort of timelessness which is borne out in the film’s whole stylistic procedure. The same effect is secured when someone uses the present-day locution ‘There you go’: that doesn’t belong to the twenties, you think, but, like the Cohen song, it acts as a hook (as it were) to a later time without disrupting the sense of period.

So, is *The Tender Hook* a period piece or not? The answer is yes and no. Like such earlier Australian films as *Squizzy* (Kevin James Dobson, 1982) and *Kitty and the Bagman* (Donald Crombie, 1982), it has a 1920s metropolitan setting (*Squizzy* in Melbourne and *Kitty* in Sydney) and it revolves round an underworld of shady deals and serious crime. Unlike these films, though, *The Tender Hook* is not concerned with the detailed recreation of period and place. At the time of *Squizzy*’s production, director Dobson was on record as saying: ‘There is not one little piece that is not absolutely correct. Some of the places may have been moved around but that is what Melbourne looked like in the 1920s.’ This is not the sort of enterprise that director Ogilvie seems to have embarked on with *The Tender Hook*.

There are some specific 1920s signifiers. Flapper Daisy (Pia Miranda) wobbles her bottom in a flapper dress of layered white panels; English ‘businessman’ McHeath wears a giveaway diamond-patterned golfing pullover that Bertie Wooster might have worn; there’s an art deco movie house advertising Alfred Hitchcock’s 1927 boxing film *The Ring*. As to place, is that a teasing glimpse of what could be the Sydney Harbour Bridge under construction? The timing would have been right. And in narrative terms, there are lots of references to an underworld of drugs and sex and fights and crime of a kind that we’ve been brought up to associate with this racy period.

But as for a thoroughgoing recreation of 1920s Sydney, forget it. I don’t just mean that the film was actually shot in Victoria (Melbourne, Sale and Longford, a small town near Sale), that possible bit of Bridge-building or the single long shot of Bondi...
Beach aside. This is not a film interested in geographical specificity any more than it is in nailing its narrative in time. Much of *The Tender Hook* is, in any case, set in interiors, including a boxing-club gym, a nightclub and a white art deco house.

What Ogilvie seems to have aimed at is not mimetic realism but an evocation of an ambience – of a look and a sound that conjure up the collective memory of a time and place, while retaining a certain elusiveness. Ogilvie seems to refuse the easy gratifications of recognition in favour of a more stylized resonance. It could be there and then, or it could be anywhere. This is not intended as criticism of Pete Baxter’s production design which, in collaboration with Geoffrey Simpson’s discreetly glowing cinematography, is often a thing of evocative beauty. What I do have in mind is that the look and sound of the film are at the service less of realist representation than of genre affiliation.

But what genre or genres? One of the most interesting aspects of recent Australian cinema has been its attraction towards generic conventions, distinguishing its output from much of the filmmaking that characterized the revival of the 1970s and 1980s. We’ve recently had, among quite a few others, a teen movie (*The Black Balloon* [Elissa Down, 2008]), a road movie (*Lucky Miles* [Michael James Rowland, 2007]), a mockumentary (*Razzle Dazzle* [Darren Ashton, 2007]) and a Western (*The Proposition* [John Hillcoat, 2005]). It’s as though we’ve stopped having to project the national life as ardently as was once the case, and can relax into, and work local variations on, proven generic templates.

Where does *The Tender Hook* belong in such a shifting production context? It can be ‘read’ as a noir thriller; it certainly has the look and feel for sudden violence that noir expectations are unquestionably meant to see McHeath as having a more compassionate side: when Iris is persuading him to give Art another chance, she says it’s ‘because he’s got heart. You’ve got one too’; and we’ll later see McHeath shed tears, tough noir club-owning crim that he is. But the screenplay doesn’t encourage our involvement in this way. Weaving wears a tux convincingly, adopts a posh English accent from time to time, is photographed from below in ways that accentuate his authority in regard to everyone else, but ‘heart’? No. This element seems to have been added as some sort of afterthought, as though to give his character a richer texture.

Then, suddenly, as this bad thing looms, we jump back to a time three months earlier. We’ll expect, accustomed as we are to thrillers with enigmatic opening moments, that the rest of the film will fill us in on this couple sitting in the back of the car and whatever the henchmen with the mouth-taped-but-moaning body are up to. Iris (played by a marvellously assured and sexy Rose Byrne), the woman in the car, is the girlfriend of an older man, McHeath. She will prove to be the apex of a triangle completed by McHeath’s latest boxing protégé, Art Walker (Matt Le Nevez).

The echoes in the film of an old-time boxing melodrama derive from McHeath hiring Art as sparring partner to his Aboriginal boxer, Alby O’Shea (Luke Carroll). Art displaces Alby, whose racial origins are against his prospects; Iris is attracted to Art as soon as he steps into the ring and even more so when she finds him in the rooms and just stepping out of the shower. Art falls out of favour with McHeath and the only engagement he can get is an alarming ‘chaff-bag fight’ in which four hooded opponents flail at each other in the ring. This is cunningly filmed as if shots are taken from inside the bags over the boxers’ heads. At Iris’ instigation, McHeath attempts to promote Art’s career by presenting him at a fight in Brisbane as a visiting American champ, Al Norwood. This ‘fixed’ fight doesn’t work out in quite the way it is intended. The boxing episodes are all well shot, with a montage of bodies, blows, falls, and cards announcing the round numbers.

I won’t go into further details about this aspect of the plot, except to say that it considerably complicates the romantic triangle grafted on to the boxing scenario with its gangster undertow. Jealousy and opportunism work their way, as they so typically do in noir thrillers, and don’t expect a happy resolution from the plaing of these generic strands. We are clearly meant to see McHeath as having a more compassionate side: when Iris is persuading him to give Art another chance, she says it’s ‘because he’s got heart. You’ve got one too’; and we’ll later see McHeath shed tears, tough noir club-owning crim that he is. But the screenplay doesn’t encourage our involvement in this way. Weaving wears a tux convincingly, adopts a posh English accent from time to time, is photographed from below in ways that accentuate his authority in regard to everyone else, but ‘heart’? No. This element seems to have been added as some kind of afterthought, as though to give his character a richer texture.

Of the others involved in the noir triangle, Matt Le Nevez, who so looks like a boxer that one believes in his successes in the ring, does what he can with limited character cues – the war-hero brother, the feeling for the Aboriginal boxer Alby, the sexual attraction to Iris – but there isn’t much for him to work on. It’s Rose Byrne who most clearly seems to understand the genres she’s fetched up in – and which she’s so fetching in. She has the enigmatic
aura of the noir heroine: she knows how to be still, to let suspicions of intent and feeling register in a small move of the lips or shift of the gaze; she’s aware of her sexual power over men and uses it without letting it rob her of all genuine emotion. Like Weaving and Le Nevez, she doesn’t get much help from the screenplay, but she makes all possible use of what is there. There’s something about a father who died of drink, and she is involved with unscrupulous importers of Japanese beer (I think, but can’t be sure, partly because of the unacceptable ellipses in plot development, and partly because of some failures of articulation in relation to what may have been key narrative pointers).

There is a pervasive sense of precariously based loyalties and sudden betrayal, of jockeying for sexual places and for striking back when the turn of events displeases, of very dangerous things happening as a result of people not following the rules they should know. But I persist in wanting it to be all a little less cryptic in establishing connections. What, for instance, is Iris’ connection with the mysterious Japanese dealer, Hackett (Kuni Hashimoto)? Is it to do with her father? Is she merely mendacious when she tells McHeath, ‘I’m back for good’? I’ve watched the film twice in rapid succession and some of its plot manoeuvres still leave me asking, ‘What?’ ‘Why?’ One accepts that its period and place are a matter of stylization rather than realist recreation. It’s not that one wants everything spelt out as if it’s a case of the Secret Seven, but in the end (and this ‘end’ is noir indeed), The Tender Hook, stylish as it is, settles for style over substance – and substance abuse. It undeniably looks good, tastes good, but it doesn’t stay with you afterwards.

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Endnote