ON WHEELS: GIRLS, BOYS AND MONSTER TRUCKS IN ROAD TRAIN

While certainly not pushing any boundaries, this solid genre film is guaranteed to entertain. As Alexandra Heller-Nicholas explains, it also offers some thrilling surprises and an intelligent take on the ‘final girl’ figure.

IT'S FUNNY what a difference a year can make. Roughly at this same time last year, the local horror offerings Australians had to look forward to were the uneven and often disappointing films Prey (George T. Miller, 2009), Coffin Rock (Rupert Glasson, 2009), Crush (Jeffrey Gerritsen and John V. Soto, 2009), and Bad Bush (Samuel Genocchio, 2009). Now, there's a distinct increase in quality, with movies like The Loved Ones (Sean Byrne, 2009), Wasted on the Young (Ben C. Lucas, 2010) and Road Train (Dean Francis, 2010). As with genre film more generally, the release dates for these films have been patchy; while about to gain cinema release in Australia, for example, Road Train debuted in the US at the illustrious Fangoria Fright Fest in June and is already available on DVD in the UK. Like The Loved Ones, these releases are no doubt in part rushing to profit on lead actor Xavier Samuel's appearance in The Twilight Saga: Eclipse (David Slade, 2010). Indeed, Samuel's solid (although at times, perhaps deliberately, camp) performance is one of Road Train's many highlights.

Road Train is neither particularly original nor genre defining, but it is a huge amount of fun. It balances a clear love of its Australian landscape with a highly developed genre literacy that, while never aspiring to Tarantino-levels of pastiche, proudly demonstrates knowledge of its generic roots. Provoking immediate comparisons to films including Duel (Steven Spielberg, 1971), Joy Ride (John Dahl, 2001) and even Steven King's story about a possessed clothes-folding machine in The Mangler (Tobe Hooper, 1995), Road Train's engagement with monstrous Australian road culture offers a parallel heritage linking it to locally produced movies such as Mad Max (George Miller, 1979), The Cars That Ate Paris (Peter Weir, 1974), Fair Game (Mario Andrecichio, 1986) and Richard Franklin's 1981 film Road Games, to which it owes its greatest debt. Road Train is open in its intent to attract a teenage audience, and alone this will impede it gaining the reputation or critical accolades of Wolf Creek (Greg Mclean, 2005). But hidden in its frenzy of gory, spooky silliness is an intelligent and subtle deployment of its 'final girl' figure in the context of the ugly gender politics between its three other characters.

With a sex scene, a car chase, an explosion and a close-up of contorted blood and bone in its first ten minutes, Road Train is by no means a slow burner. Unlike many Australian horror films supposedly aimed at an adolescent demographic (Martin Murphy’s 2003 film Lost Things is particularly of note here), Road Train's pacing is snappy and upbeat, making Clive Hopkins' often simplistic dialogue almost forgivable. Made for $2.1 million and filmed in South Australia's Flinders Rangers, the film follows a group of four teenage friends on an outback camping
holiday. *Road Train* begins as Craig (Home and Away's Bob Morley in his feature debut) and Nina (AFI nominee Sophie Lowe from Rachel Ward's 2009 film *Beautiful Kate*) have loud sex in their tiny tent. In the next tent, Marcus (Samuels) and his girlfriend Liz (Georgina Haig) lie awkwardly next to each other after Marcus rejects Liz's sexual approach. As the group have breakfast the following morning, there is clearly tension between Liz and Marcus. Referring to the other couple, Marcus says to Liz, 'don't worry, he'll get bored of her'. The blissfully post-coital Nina and Craig, however, appear not to notice. The group take to the road and are rammed by a road train, a huge truck with a number of large containers rigged to it. Shocked, Liz demands revenge, and as they pass the truck she flips the bird and screams 'bastard!' In retaliation, they are rammed again much harder, their car crashing in a spectacular explosion of red dust and twisted metal. Craig's arm is badly injured, and the group realise that the truck has parked nearby. Hoping the truck has stopped to provide assistance, Liz and Marcus walk towards it while Nina stays with the injured Craig. When they reach it, however, they find it deserted, the keys still in the ignition. They attempt to check the contents of the containers, but find them locked. Joined by Nina and Craig, they are jolted by the sound of gunshots and see a strange man in a brown suit running towards them wielding a gun (played in a brief cameo by David Argue). The teenagers jump into the truck's cabin and drive toward the closest town for help.

As Marcus drives through the night, all four become sleepy. Marcus drifts into a strange surreal vision of the outback landscape in which he sees three wolves with glowing red eyes, animals almost identical to the truck's hood ornament that had transfixed Craig before they escaped the crazed gunman. Drifting off the main road, they awake to discover that they are now stuck in a dead end and that the truck will no longer start. It is here that the bulk of the film's strange action unfolds. After much bickering, Liz and Marcus attempt to find help by locating a shack that Liz is convinced she saw. During their search, it is revealed that Liz and Craig have slept together and that Liz is frustrated because she does not understand how Marcus can forgive Craig yet can still be angry with her. Back at the truck, Craig's behaviour becomes increasingly odd and he finds a fleshy, David Cronenberg-inspired key hidden in the plush red folds of the cabin's upholstery. Granting him access to one of the containers, he emerges fully healed and acting even more peculiarly.

More strange occurrences and a genuinely shocking and unexpected twist reduce their number to three. In the final act, Nina discovers the gruesome, supernatural reason why the truck can run on an empty petrol tank, and the loyalties, ethics and strengths of the remaining teenagers are put to the test in a struggle for survival.

One of *Road Train*’s opening images shows Nina peeing on the edge of a cliff as she looks over a sweeping landscape. With its elegant cinematography, lush hues and lens flares, this seemingly tasteless image is rendered both intimate and beautiful. From this point onwards, the film continues to make otherwise tacky and even silly subject matter beautiful, an ability apparent in the depiction of the monstrous truck itself. Just before they are attacked, Liz describes the approaching road train as like 'being overtaken by a high-rise apartment block'. Humbled by its overwhelming spectacle, she describes it as 'beautiful'. When she initially approaches the truck with Marcus, the hard angular lines juxtapose sharply against the
Bright, organic curves of the surrounding landscape, a contrast as striking as the appearance of the monolith in the primitive world that opens Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). Nina's discovery of the truck's supernatural secret is foreshadowed by the plush dark red interior of the cabin, again providing a strong contrast between the truck and the neutral tones of their own car before it is strewn across the highway in the spectacular crash scene. Formally, other elements of Road Train are just as well executed and carefully thought out. Rafael May's score is unobtrusive and evocative in equal measure throughout the film, but smoothly comes to the fore with its sudden incongruous chorus of ethereal female vocals during key moments of revelation and transformation for the film's characters. Even the seemingly schlocky visions of the three wolves are cleverly deployed, seeming to consciously evoke the composition of Antonia Neshev's now-infamous 'Three Wolf Moon' T-shirt artwork.

While striking, the film's stylistic features pale in comparison to its gender politics. From the early shot of Liz and Marcus lying awkwardly together as they listen to Craig and Nina's robust sexual union, it is apparent that relations between males and females in the film are going to be a source of some interest. Haig is to be commended for making Liz so utterly unlikeable yet still managing to save her from the terrain of the cartoonishly villainous. While the script paints her as little more than a typical 'bitch', the frustration she voices in her confrontation with Marcus about her previous sexual encounter haunts her character throughout the film. This scene is remarkable in that it exposes a hypocrisy in the comparatively likeable Marcus, which, by liking him more than Liz, the audience discovers they are complicit in. When Liz pleadingly begs him to explain to her 'why it's so easy to accept his [Craig's] apology and not mine', she highlights the fact that Marcus' barely concealed contempt towards her contrasts sharply with his business-as-usual relationship with his best friend, the equally guilty Craig. Nice-guy Marcus' response is as shocking as it is ugly, but at the same time still sadly realistic: 'You're right, apology accepted,' he says as he hugs her, but then his gentle affection turns into a hard, mean, angry kiss as he sarcastically explodes, 'Feel better now?' Devastated and frustrated, the crying Liz never gets her answer, for what the film implies is a simple yet terrifying reason: Marcus himself doesn't understand why he can forgive Craig but not Liz. The exposure of this double standard - that Liz is implied to be a 'slut' while Craig is forgiven because, it is suggested, boys will simply be boys - is one of the film's more interesting features. However, when it is exposed at the end of the film that Liz has been in love with Craig all along, it does, to some degree, let Marcus retrospectively off the hook: he was right, it seems, to suspect Liz of disloyalty. Liz may be confused and may have cheated on her boyfriend, but next to Craig's manipulative and sexist treatment of women, she should be forgiven (if not by Marcus, then at least by the audience).

Considering the increase in Craig's misogyny throughout the film, his girlfriend Nina is a significant choice for Road Train's final girl. Nina stands far apart from her traditional predecessors as outlined in Carol J. Clover's foundational Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film in a number of key ways. With her inappropriately sexy sandals, floral minidress and freely admitted lack of skills and experience in the outdoors, Nina is far from tomboyish. And, as the opening sex scene demonstrates only too clearly, she is far from virginal. As Craig tells her when Liz and Marcus first make their way toward the truck for help, it had been the three of them (Liz, Marcus and himself) for many years, and he apologises for bringing her on the trip (both because of the accident and also because of Liz's open hostility towards her). Further evidence of Nina's status as an outsider is the fact that her name is barely spoken in the first fifty minutes of the film: she is referred to only as 'her' or 'she' (again, particularly by Liz), or spoken to directly without her name. It is this outsider status, however, that grants Nina the freedom to investigate, to learn vital information about their unusual predicament and to ultimately save herself. Either unaware or indifferent to Craig and Liz's previous sexual encounter, Nina is not distracted by the nasty personal politics that engross Liz and Marcus. Rather, she is a sexually liberated, confident and intelligent young woman who uses both her intellect and instinct to come to grips with her situation and to find a way out.

Road Train is not an important or particularly special film, but in a strange way that is what makes it so enjoyable. It is a solid genre film and it is to be commended for its love of the teen horror movie traditions of which it is a part without being smug, judgemental or patronising. While its sub-generic heritage has international scope, its particular deployment of its sexy-teens-versus-the-monstrous-supernatural-force trope is uniquely Australian, and uses both the influence of national film history and the nuances of the outback locale to its advantage. These four young actors will probably not win AFI nominations for their performances, but this film was never intended for the AFI judges. Road Train knows there's a harsher judge out there: the horror audience themselves, who will continue to eat up and spit out inferior or insincere products in a constant search for good gory fun without missing a heartbeat.

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