From go to whoa, *Crush* is retro without any aspect of pastiche, and while relatively inoffensive, it offers a pedestrian tour through standard genre territory.
Fatal distractions: Australian horror beyond national cinema

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas looks at the state of Australian horror filmmaking, and finds that, for the most part, recent features come up wanting.

Since Picnic at Hanging Rock (Peter Weir, 1975) marked the intersection of a blossoming Australian national film culture and the strange and spooky, hopes for the broader film industry have often been pinned upon shadowy cinematic ventures. Mark Hartley’s documentary Not Quite Hollywood (2008) summarised the most recent manifestation of this dark ambition for post-Wolf Creek Australian horror, declaring that Greg Mclean’s 2005 international success story had triggered a new wave of locally produced genre film.

Without wishing to dwell on the obvious, it is clear that the other films lauded in Hartley’s documentary – Jamie Blanks’ Storm Warning (2007) and Long Weekend (2008), and Mclean’s own Rogue (2007) – did not quite set the world on fire. This is not to suggest that there has been a total absence of quality material produced within the generic confines of horror since 2005 in Australia, as a film such as Steven Kastrissios’ ultra-violent revenge tale The Horseman (2008) so poignantly demonstrates. But five years after Wolf Creek, and in the wake of its much-discussed success, horror appears to have become a natural choice for aspiring local filmmakers to make their mark. Four titles alone – Prey (Oscar D’Roccster, 2009), Crush (Jeffrey Gerritsen and John...
The number of horror films that are funded, produced and distributed in this country therefore raises key issues for debate. But are we asking the wrong questions? Or, at least, are the questions we are asking too narrowly focused on these films’ status as Australian films alone? As the multitude of positive non-Australian reviews of Wolf Creek testify, Mclean’s debut made its global impact not only because of its ‘Australian-ness’, but because it was also a bloody good horror film. That it so eloquently captured a truly Australian sensibility was, for non-Australian audiences, merely a bonus.

So should Australian analyses of locally produced horror hinge upon their status as ‘Australian films’ first and ‘horror films’ second, or is it more important that they function primarily as engaging horror films first and foremost?

Wolf Creek tells us that a combination is ideal: being both a good Australian film and a good horror film is not and should not be impossible. This is demonstrated in non-Australian national cinemas, most notably by the explosion of the internationally popular J-Horror phenomenon in the 1990s. But the mollycoddling much Australian horror has received from critics with little interest in the genre suggests that the current equation is loaded perhaps a little too heavily towards surface twist of swapping Glenn Close’s iconic bunny-boiler with a baby kangaroo-bashing Irish adolescent male is never addressed as more than a superficial variation on a theme.

Even rising above its self-conscious Australianism, then, Coffin Rock has more potential to alienate a horror audience than to please it. The most immediate issue is its title: Coffin Rock is already a familiar name to horror fans as it was where the zeitgeist-defining The Blair Witch Project was set. It is either through arrogance, coincidence or flagrant disinterest that the Australian Coffin Rock dismisses any associations with its namesake. In fan circles at least, it could be assumed that writer/director Rupert Glasson’s lack of interest and knowledge of horror render him little more than a ‘genre tourist’ attempting to cash in on horror’s current mainstream acceptance.

There are concerns that rise above the peculiarities of horror fandom, however. Coffin Rock follows the story of a married couple desperately trying to conceive a child. The increasingly frustrated wife, Jessie, has sex with the strange young Irish newcomer Evan (Sam Parsonson), while drunk. After finding herself pregnant, Jessie realises that Evan’s infatuation has evolved into a violent, stalking rampage as he terrorises the couple.

Coffin Rock wears its debt to Fatal Attraction on its sleeve, but its surface twist of swapping Glenn Close’s iconic bunny-boiler with a baby kangaroo-bashing Irish adolescent male is never addressed as anything more than a superficial variation on a theme.

The usual suspects

Of all four films, Coffin Rock stands out from the others on a number of counts. Its highly polished production values transcend the budgetary constraints under which it was made, and producer David Lightfoot’s name brings in an explicit association with Wolf Creek, on which he filled the same role. Its adult subject matter places it far above horror’s assumed teenage realm, the painstakingly fetishised wintry Australian coastal locale is beautifully shot, and the performances of its main cast (particularly Lisa Chappell in the lead role of Jessie) cannot be faulted. On these counts alone, Coffin Rock should be a satisfying viewing experience and a likely contender to carry the Wolf Creek baton.

But, as films ranging from Night of the Living Dead (George A. Romero, 1968) to Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2007) suggest, high production values are far from essential to a successful horror film. Big names may have pulling power in terms of funding and marketing, but a brief look at some of the biggest horror releases over the last ten years shows as many new names as familiar ones. From Dracula and Frankenstei to The Fog (John Carpenter, 1980) to The Blair Witch Project (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) and beyond, environment often plays a crucial role in horror, but the seemingly obligatory ‘porning’ of the landscape in Australian horror ignores just how vital it is aesthetically as well as thematically to films like Wolf Creek and Picnic at Hanging Rock.

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face twist of swapping Glenn Close's iconic bunny-boiler with a baby kangaroo-bashing Irish adolescent male is never addressed as anything more than a superficial variation on a theme. Despite its surface concern with gender and power, then, this film is fundamentally disinterested in engaging with either, and it appears to deliberately avoid the very real issues that hinge upon its often concerning assumptions. Aside from the confusing necessity to make the villainous Evan a racial Other, that Jessie clearly asks Evan to stop during sex establishes a complex and sophisticated ideological web that the film fails to address outside of the barest of melodramatic terms. This rape becomes ambiguous in the film's ethical construction of Jessie: as a problematic morality tale that appears to be teaching the dangers of monstrous-thirty-something-women-who-will-do-anything-to-conceive, the film is explicit that Jessie is the one for whom the lesson is intended. Cheat on your husband, and Irish teenagers will cause you grief. But what if an Irish teenager rapes you? The suggestion of rape only makes sense if – disturbingly – it has been employed solely to 'soften' Jessie enough so that spectatorial alignment is not totally alienated from her. Unlike other recent horror films that tackle motherhood, conception and pregnancy – Grace (Paul Solet, 2009) and Inside (Alexandre Bustillo and Julien Maury, 2007) in particular – Coffin Rock fails as both a satisfying genre film and in its attempt to engage with the complexities of gender and fertility.

Best described as High School Musical meets The Ring meets Fatal Attraction, Crush also reworks the infidelity/stalker scenario, but with a distinctive teen demographic in mind. Outside of its too-frequent mentions of Perth and the accents of its support cast, there is little to suggest that the country of origin is of any real significance to the action that takes place. From go to whoa, Crush is retro without any aspect of pastiche, and while relatively inoffensive, it offers a pedestrian tour through standard genre territory.

The film follows Julian (Christopher Egan), an American exchange student and tae kwon do champion who moves to Perth after an underage drinking scandal. Settled into university life, he has a job as a house-sitter and is in a relationship with fellow student Clare (Brooke Harmon). He is asked on short notice to look after a man-sion in the Perth suburbs, and it is here that he begins a passionate fling with the vampy Anna (Emma Lung), whom he believes is the owner’s niece. When Anna discovers her feelings towards Julian are not reciprocated, she retaliates with violent repercussions, and Julian makes some shocking discoveries.

Christopher Egan is clearly the drawcard of this film, and Crush feels like little more than a vehicle to capitalise on his increasing visibility in the United States. Now based in Los Angeles, Sydney-born Egan is familiar to Australian audiences primarily due to his three-year stint as Nick Smith on Home and Away. But his international exposure has been on the rise since his appearance in Resident Evil: Extinction (Russel Mulcahy, 2007) and Eragon (Stefen Fangmeier, 2006), and is only set to continue with television series such as Kings. With a name befitting an upcoming scream queen, Logie-winning Emma Lung has also appeared in the British/Australian horror co-production Triangle (Christopher Smith, 2009) (in which she co-stars with Melissa George), and is rumoured to be starring in Cradewood (Henry Weinmann) in 2011 with The Vampire Diaries’ Ian Somerhalder.

If Crush feels like CV filler for expats, then that is because that's precisely what it is. Video stores across the country are packed to the rafters with precisely this sort of movie: competently executed and banal in equal measure, there is nothing particularly ‘Australian’ about this film on any real symbolic level, yet ironically it is perhaps its country of origin that grants it its only ability to stand out from the literally hundreds of titles of its ilk that are produced across the world each year. If either Egan or Lung makes an impact internationally, then this film may retrospectively prove to be an interesting early-career curio. But when viewed with Coffin Rock, the only current interesting early-career curio. But when viewed with Coffin Rock, the only current interesting early-career curio. But when viewed with Coffin Rock, the only current interesting early-career curio. But when viewed with Coffin Rock, the only current interesting early-career curio. But when viewed with Coffin Rock, the only current interesting early-career curio. But when viewed with Coffin Rock, the only current interesting early-career curio.

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The unbearable lightness of trash

Less of an enigma is the public and critical reception of Prey. It was written by the co-director and writer of Crush, John V. Soto, whose work seems to speak of a visible distaste for the type of token ‘Australianism’ that marks films like Coffin Rock. And while this may be a concern for those whose sole interest is in the state of national cinema in this country, it also proves problematic for those of us interested in genre: there is a distinctly ‘trying too hard’ air to both Crush and Prey in their determination to reject anything less than universally utilitarian genre tropes, motifs and themes. So focused on accessibility are Crush and Prey that they fail to focus on the basic mechanics that dominate successful horror.

But while Crush may be considered at least perfunctory, Prey is an arrogant and messy disaster from beginning to end. Receiving less than positive reviews almost unanimously – even from the usually optimistic Andrew L. Urban – Prey was clearly impeded by the departure mid-production of director George T. Miller; it was ultimately released with ‘Oscar D’Roccster’ credited as director. That the ordinarily vigorous online horror fan forums are bereft of information about D’Roccster is telling and adds to suspicions that the name is probably an alias. With Wikipedia claiming the film had diabolically grim opening weekend takings of $342.5 it seems that even the presence of pop star and ex-Neighbours stahl Natalie Bassingthwaighte proved incapable of attracting an audience interested in horror.

As cult classic Suspiria (Dario Argento, 1977) demonstrates, a cohesive and engaging narrative is far from essential in horror, and with its supposed ‘outback’ filmed in a warehouse in Melbourne, there is a synthetic, almost pantomime-like aesthetic quality to Prey that alludes to the Italian horror classics of the 1960s and 1970s. But the overtly contrived nature of Prey’s mise en scène suggests a failed attempt at versimilitude rather than a conscious engagement with camp or avant-garde traditions. While far from interesting, at least technically Prey shows some attempts at creativity, however unsuccessful. But it is a combination of the performances and the script itself that causes the bulk of the film’s problems.

Prey follows three couples that end up stranded in the ‘outback’ on their way to the beach on a surfing trip. A précis of the plot is difficult beyond this point, but it appears that a malign mystical figure who was responsible for deaths twenty years ago has struck again, killing the current batch of interlopers one by one. And interlopers they are: with clumsy and frenetic exposition attempting to explain why most of the six people speak with American accents, Prey is garbled in more ways than one. Its weirdly random mysticism smacks of inherent racism, but it is so incomplete and incoherent that to articulate where this sense comes from is in itself impossible. Just as problematic is Natalie Bassingthwaighte’s performance: so much of this film hinges upon her supposed star power, but her sexual presence (particularly in the desperately promoted so-called ‘lesbian’ moments) has all the sensuality and sophistication of a one-alcogop-too-many suburban nightclub tragedy.

Bassingthwaighte’s involvement in the project is clearly an attempt to capitalise on her broader celebrity status, and for this the Prey team cannot be condemned. Most instantly, this recalls Paris Hilton’s appearance in films like House of Wax (Jaume Collet-Serra, 2005) or Repo! The Genetic Opera (Darren Lynn Bousman, 2008). But these films, at least, placed their token celebrity in a role clearly intended for a token celebrity – the weight of these films did not hinge solely on Hilton’s presence, and in fact, she is diegetically (de)valued with a deep sense of irony in both films, as her celebrity persona so obviously transcends the bare-bones characterisations demanded by the films themselves. But even if Bassingthwaighte had played her part less as a Milla ‘Resident Evil’ Jovovich wannabe and more in the spirit of Hilton’s really fun but really silly forays into horror, Prey would still have had some serious flaws to contend with. If Prey has an immediate lesson for fellow Australian horror filmmakers, it is to not misinterpret the value or misdirect the utility of ‘celebrity’ in a horror context.

Samuel Genocchio’s Bad Bush takes precisely the opposite approach to its female lead, and local papers on the New South Wales central coast published a range of stories detailing the director’s search for an unknown to star opposite Home and Away and Underbelly: A Tale of Two Cities actor, Chris Sadrinna. Settling on newcomer Viva Bianca to play protagonist Ophelia, Bad Bush lacks the polish of Coffin Rock, the teenybopper hooks of Crush and Natalie Bassingthwaighte’s cleavage. It is raw, it is tacky in places, and it is truly independent in the sense that it clearly lacks the industry savviness of competing titles in terms of promotion and presentation. But bereft of tokenism, Bad Bush neither fetishises nor distorts the look of the bush: it shows rural Australia how it knows rural Australia to be.

Bad Bush is both charming and a lot of fun. The story is simple: Ophelia takes her baby to visit her sister in the bush, but the sister vanishes and leaves Ophelia stranded with Weaver (Sadrinna), a flaky hippy who grows and sells pot to a local bikie gang. Ophelia soon discovers that Weaver’s darker side is a product of his use of his own produce, and this provides the cat-and-mouse stalk structure that is in place for the rest of the film. Aside from a real love of old-fashioned ghost-train-style frights and a gift for creating tension (the Monopoly scene is particularly noteworthy), Sadrinna’s Weaver cleverly begins engaging with traditional buchanan iconography, but introduces to it what can only be described as Michael Hutchence-esque sleaze. Whether Sadrinna and Genocchio deliberately aimed to subvert this rarely articulated but readily identifiable Australian iconography is unclear, but it works. Just as Wolf Creek’s Mick Young perverts Crocodile Dundee’s Mick Dundee, so too is Bad Bush’s Weaver a hyperactive and excessive subversion of the late INXS frontman’s trademark sexuality. Where Hutchence winked, flirted and gyrated his way into the popular memory, Weaver extends this to its absolute extreme: he is sexually aggressive, psychologically manipulative and physically uncontrollable.

Bad Bush is unlikely to garner the attention of Australian cinema scholars in the same way as Wolf Creek, and for many it will be an easily forgotten, if not easier, entry into the annals of locally produced horror. The twist at the end is not surprising, but – like the best Roger Corman films – it leaves the viewer in a thoroughly pleasing state somewhere between an eye-roll and a handclap. It is precisely films like this that will give the world the next Wolf Creek: it
will be a film with an honest and uncynical glee in the processes of genre filmmaking, a love of filming Australia and Australians, and, above all, a keen eye for old-fashioned horror fun. While not altogether successful, Bad Bush – right down to the slightly bawdy innuendo of its title – is self-aware but never smug, and it shares this with all great horror films from Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) to The Haunting (Robert Wise, 1963) to The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980). Genocchio is to be commended on reminding us, in this time of genre glut, that the simple pleasures of the horror film that are so often forgotten are worth their weight in gold.

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Endnotes


2 Similar accusations have been made against films of the ‘Ozploitation’ era, and these are discussed in Hartley’s Not Quite Hollywood. I have offered alternate readings of this attitude in ‘Dark Forces: Excess and Absence in Harlequin and Beyond’, Metro, no. 162, 2009, pp.98–102.

3 There is evidence to suggest some contradictions in Glasson’s approach to horror in an interview he did on the Bloody Disgusting website. While pushing the film’s generic aspects (particularly the violence) and admitting the project began as a monster film, when the interviewer ‘Mr Disgusting’ asks him horror-specific questions, he is careful to avoid the H-word and always talks about ‘thrill-ers’ in his replies. See ‘Coffin Rock: Writer/Director Rupert Glasson’, <http://www.bloody-disgusting.com/interview/534>, accessed 20 October 2009.

4 Actor Sam Parsonson is not Irish, but speaks with a very thick accent and there are numerous references in the film to his heritage.

