The Ambiguities of Ancestry: Antiquity, Ruins and the Converging Literary Traditions of

Australian Gothic Cinema

The pervasive aesthetics of Gothic are seen as dominant or in ascendance in the twenty-first century by various critics (for instance, Hubner 2018; Spooner 2017). Prone to divergent and contradictory discourses (Spooner 2017; Ng 2008), the transnational taste for Gothic offers a challenge in thinking about the domestic traditions in Australian cinema. 'Gothic' is identified as a prominent mode of cinema since the 1970s and one that is often referenced to literary conventions. In particular, a tendency in recent criticism traces the ancestry to British or European literary forebears from the late-eighteenth century, or roughly the time of colonization of Australia (see Stadler 2019; Gaunson 2019; Richards 2018; Rayner 2011). The genetics and inheritance are in question in the present article. Attention is drawn to the convergence of literary and cinematic traditions in commentary on Australian Gothic films, and the often-overlooked architectural elements of historical Gothic aesthetics. It offers a perspective on Jessica Balanzategui's (2017) observation that 'Australian Gothic' has become an 'amorphous catch-all term' for a range of Australian films that span horror and art tropes across a wide range of years (23). She rightly pinpoints a source of ambiguity in the descriptions of 'Australian Gothic' films in the 1970s (23).

Indeed, there is more than one source of ambiguity because at least two different descriptions of Australian Gothic converge in discussions of Australian cinema. One stems from the colonial literary archive, sometimes identified as 'bush melancholy' which names the pessimistic and haunted mythos of the fatal bush in the settler imaginary (Lesley Hawkes 2017). The other tradition, as Balanzategui points out, stems from the touchstone work by Susan

Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Australian Screen* (1987/88), in which they describe a group of modernist, grotesque films as 'Australian Gothic'. Irrespective of this group, many contemporary, early and Revival Australian films exhibit signs of literary bush melancholy, especially the 'period' films that number in Dermody and Jacka's 'AFC genre' which they distinguish from their 'Australian Gothic' group. I argue that both the 'Australian Gothic' and bush melancholy traditions have debatable connection to historical eighteenth-century Gothic literature, even though an influential essay by Jonathan Rayner (2011) works with Dermody and Jacka's definition to discern similarities between their 'Australian Gothic' genre and 'antecedents in [British] Gothic literature' (92). *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir 1975) is cited as a key example for its 'symbolic Radcliffian landscape' which situates it, he argues, in a 'purer' Gothic vein (92). Yet, as I show later, Dermody and Jacka expressly name *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as an exception to their list of 'Australian Gothic' films.

This discrepancy, and the uptake of these traditions in recent accounts of Australian Gothic cinema are discussed further in this article. Colonial Australian literature and its bush melancholy discourse is often seen as evidence of how the British (or European) genre of the Gothic novel was 'transplant[ed]' and adapted in response to settlers' encounters with landscapes, peoples, and the conditions of colonization (Turcotte 2009, 354). In some contemporary commentary on Australian cinema a similar link is made (Stadler 2019; Gaunson 2019) or implied (Richards 2018). It is based on the loose premise that the settlement of Australia roughly coincided with the peak of popularity of the Gothic novel in England and Europe in the 1790s. Gerry Turcotte (1998) has influentially argued that this connection also descends from the pre-history of Australia in the classical imagining of the Antipodes as a 'grotesque space' which became the 'dark subconscious of Britain', or 'Gothic *par excellence,*

the dungeon of the world' (10, emphases in original). Turcotte cites journals of First Fleets that identified elements of the landscape as 'Gothic' and (following James Broadbent and Joan Kerr) notes how a fashionable imported taste for Gothic in architecture later symbolized the colony's '"maturity"' (11).

It is more than an aside to presume that Turcotte refers to the 'Gothic Revival' colonial architecture that Brian Andrews (2001), an historian of architecture, terms an 'intra-Empire' style (161) and which represents a more hegemonic vein of Australian Gothic aesthetics. It was derived from the English taste for 'High Victorian Gothic' (14) which had been stimulated by the Romantic movement and a growing antiquarian interest in the stock of medieval buildings in England (7). The colonial Gothic Revival style was generically marked by towers, turrets and flying buttresses (largely on institutional buildings–churches, schools, prisons–more than residences). The English influence is ubiquitous, Andrews says, with occasional evidence of parallel European movements into neo-medievalism (German *Neugotic* and French neo-*Gothique*). The most antic adaptations are the 'wooden buildings constructed as if from stone' with 'false wooden buttresses for effect' (32), a design effect which Andrews terms 'facadism' (34).

The relevance to literature and film is limited and passing, except insofar as the domestic Australian Gothic traditions – bush melancholy or modernist grotesque – are *not* typically characterized by the architectural elements so often identified with the British Gothic novel. Instead, landscape is seen as the dominant Gothic element in Australian films and interpreted as, either, a variation on the sublime landscapes of the (British) Gothic novel, or in lieu of its architectural elements, and this tendency is now widely associated with the legacy of *terra nullius*. Yet landscape forms a unique tradition of Australian cinematic spectacle irrespective of

Gothic aesthetics. Landscape thus ambiguously becomes both substitute for, and sign of difference from, the British (or European) Gothic convention, and with the irony that architecture was deemed a lack in the colonial territory, a history more discussed hereafter. In this sense, not only is Australian Gothic cinema uneasily aligned with the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, the ancestral linkage seems to re-inscribe its colonial implications.

To this extent, the ambiguous position of Indigenous cinema is also in point. While Turcotte identifies Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries* (1987) as exemplary Australian Gothic, Indigenous filmmakers are largely elided from commentary about it. Yet, notably, Moffatt, Rachel Perkins, Ivan Sen and Warwick Thornton have consistently adopted Gothic motifs and stories in complex and transformative ways in all of their films. Jane Stadler (2019) comments on the work of Perkins and Thornton but questions whether their films can be readily incorporated into the Australian Gothic oeuvre. She refers to the atypical relationship to 'Gothic sensibility' (351) in Thornton's *The Dark Side* (2013), and the collaborative genesis with non-Aboriginal creators of Perkins' films (350). Respectfully, I do not see why these or other collaborative films would be excluded from Australian Gothic cinema. Perkins, in particular, has described her work as reaching to and beyond Aboriginal audiences and, in her Boyer lectures in 2019, reflected on the unique complexity of her own Indigenous identity. While it is not the focus of this article, it seems a further and relevant ambiguity of Australian Gothic traditions.

In developing this argument, I first consider the British Gothic novel and its history as analogue of Gothic architecture of the time, and from which the aesthetic of ruin that marked its style is derived. Thereafter I examine several recent accounts of 'Australian Gothic' cinema and unravel some of the lines of literary influence from historical Gothic literature and Australian colonial literatures. Finally, I briefly consider two recent expressions in the feature film *Celeste*

(Hackworth 2019) and the television mini-series of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Rymer, Kondracki and Brotchie 2018). Both of these productions appear to parody Gothic conventions. I consider how this occurs through architectural features of *mise-en-scene* that take precedence over landscape, and the connotations of authentic settings in heritage properties. I argue that while it is important to identify antecedents of contemporary cinema, that the colonial connotations of ancestry are ambiguous and that the invoking of these long histories in the genesis of contemporary Australian cinema potentially obscures the range of influences and visional properties in contemporary and Revival films.

Architecture and the Aesthetic of Ruin in the Gothic Novel

'Gothic' is the name for a medieval style of architecture. The name was derived from the ancient Goths whose reputation in history underwent a long and mutating passage into a 'myth' that indirectly bears on the contemporary associations of Gothic (see Sowerby 2000; Hogle 2002; Groom xv-xviii). But its sources in contemporary culture are typically referenced, as noted, to the British literary genre popularized in the late eighteenth century. The 'Gothic novel' as a term is 'mostly 20th century coinage' (Clery 21), and David Punter argues that the landmark authors – Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis and Ann Radcliffe – were writing 'in different genres' (viii). Furthermore, several periods of (British) literature are now termed 'Gothic'. It is more accurate to say that the eighteenth-century genre 'yielded a gothic [sic] mode that outlasted it' (Fowler cited in Balmain) and which signifies a whole 'symbolic realm' (Hogle 2). Among the iconic tropes of the Gothic novel genre are the 'wild landscapes, the ruined castles and abbeys ... the labyrinths ... the supernatural events' (Botting 9). The element of setting in

'antiquated or seemingly antiquated space' (Hogle 2) is often evoked by temporal location in 'distant times and customs' (Botting 9).

The provenance of the term Gothic also extends to the 'hybrid' form of the works, 'delineated by borrowings and conflations, by fragmentation' and 'a rejection of set values' (Turcotte 1998, 11). What was termed 'Gothic' in the Augustan eighteenth century was anything that subverted the neo-classical taste in art and literature. It could also mean old fashioned or obsolete, or 'outlandish' (Clery 21). This period also yielded the advent of an aesthetic of 'ruin' that is traced in literature, including the architectural motifs of Gothic novels. It emerged, Nick Groom argues, from the 'historical and religious carnage' of the civil wars and Protestant reformation and the laying to ruin of the medieval abbeys and priories (xv). An arising 'fascination with deterioration and decay' inspired some of the later eighteenth-century school of Melancholy poetry which reflected on the grotesque contradiction of the progressive nation built on horrendous violence (Groom xv, xxii-xxiii).

This Melancholy tradition is also associated with the Sublime, an affect recognized in Edmund Burke's 'aesthetic extremism' which became a template for the eighteenth-century Gothic imagination (Botting 10). In this new aesthetic regime, ruins acquired relevance as 'somber but picturesque and sublime additions to ... landscape' that also alluded to the transition of the land economy (5). Gothic therefore encoded a 'paradoxical state of longing', or the contradictory desires for the aristocratic wealth and 'Catholic splendor' residing in the old orders which were displaced by the new Protestant bourgeois order (Hogle 4). Thus it was not simply a taste but a whole transforming social condition that was encoded in popular Gothic literature.

Herein lies part of the reason why the initial flourishing of 'Gothic' taste in eighteenth-century architecture is widely seen as analogue to literature (Clery 2002; Groom 2014;

Townshend 2019). Accordingly, buildings – castles, houses, chateaux – constitute persistent tropes in the eighteenth-century fiction, along with sublime landscapes and are often implicated (notably in the novels of Ann Ward Radcliffe) in plots of young women whose inheritance is threatened through forced marriages. The parallel flourishing of Gothic architecture and literature is usually traced to Strawberry Hill, the Gothic-castle-styled mansion in London, owned by Horace Walpole (Groom 2014; Botting 2000). It inspired his novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) which is generally regarded as the first Gothic novel, in spite of various proto-Gothic forerunners. Strawberry Hill – which has been restored by a dedicated heritage group and is now recognized as 'Gothic Revival' style – was 'deliberately miscellaneous', a jumble of 'Northern architecture and antique artefacts' and 'intermingling' of styles and elements that was also realized in the fiction of *The Castle of Otranto* (Groom xviii). Described as '[p]astiche' and 'lavish', and 'concocted from various effects', and architectural quotations, and filled with *objects d'art*, Walpole himself described how the aesthetic imprinted the '"gloomth of abbeys and cathedrals on one's house"' (qtd in Groom xviii).

However, *The Castle of Otranto* is now regarded as emblematic of the counterfeit at the heart of the aesthetics of the Gothic novel in which the notion of 'fiction' as fabrication is 'crucial' (Botting 5). It came to represent the power of Gothic style to disguise and recode the anxieties of the time which depended so much on its 'exaggerate[d]' fictionality, or its use to 'project modern concerns' into a 'deliberately vague, even fictionalized past' (Hogle 14-16). The attribution of 'neo-Gothic' to Walpole's novel and its analogous architectural fashions was more founded on a 'quasi-antiquarian use of symbols that are ... signs of older signs' or the Gothic signs of earlier Gothic revivals (Hogle 15; see also Clery 2002). The central cliché of the Gothic castle is an emblem of this fictionality. Dale Townshend (2019), in his monumental study of the

Gothic literature-architecture relation, argues that in spite of the founding connection between Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto,* the actual spatial resemblance between the real and fictional buildings is limited. He suggests that most castles in Gothic fictions are more imaginary than based on any actual buildings.

All this hyper-fictionality, hybridity and artifice of Gothic literature in its day raises questions about how this tradition should be invoked in the ancestry of contemporary or colonial Australian culture. How much or what of it transferred to the colonies is a query, and the connection between the date of settlement and the roots of Australian Gothic cultural discourses. Not least, from the British/European perspective, the imperial project abroad is not usually named as a factor in the popularity of Gothic taste at home which is more attributed to the impact of the Revolutions in Europe. [1] Given the significance of the melancholy aesthetics in colonial Australian literature, it is discussed further below. First, I offer some evidence of how the eighteenth-century past is invoked in accounts of Australian Gothic film and television.

The Haunted Interface: Literature and Cinema

As noted earlier, in recent writing on Australian cinema, there is persistent attribution of the Australian Gothic aesthetics to the historical ancestry of the British Gothic novel (sometimes described as 'European', although examples are not usually cited from non-British sources). Contingent legacies are also derived from the Australian Revival films of the 1970s, and from colonial Australian literature. In considering some examples, I highlight, in particular, how dissonances emerge around Dermody and Jacka's description of 'Australian Gothic', and the use of their description by Rayner in his influential essays. The purpose is to suggest how the

constitution of a Gothic tradition stemming from the pre-settlement past is ambiguously, and somewhat arbitrarily, derived.

Salutary, initially, is Stuart Richards' claims that the Gothic genesis of the ABC television series, *Glitch* (Tony Ayres and Louise Fox 2015-2019) stems from the 'Gothic novel' of 'the late 1700s' and the 'Australian Gothic films of the 1970s' (Richards 2). Thus, a few hundred years and continental shifts in cultural history are subsumed into the ways in which 'Australian Gothic differs from the European Gothic' (3). But Richards also refers to the echoes of the 'anxiety' in 'early Australian literature such as Henry Lawson's "The Bush Undertaker" and the writings of Barbara Baynton' and the 'similar themes' that 'appear in Frederick McCubbin's [painted] triptych *The Pioneer'* (3). Even so, the zombie Gothic of *Glitch* is seen as symptomatic of the tendency to 'swap the European haunted house for the ... Australian bush and the small country town' (4). A production designer of *Glitch* is quoted as '"embrac[ing] the Australianism of the project"' and admiration for (the 1975 film of) *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (qtd in Richards 6).

The commendable enthusiasm for *Glitch* and its Gothic heritage nevertheless stretches the ancestral coherence in linking the eighteenth century 'European' template to domestic cinema in the 1970s and contemporary (trans)national television (*Glitch* was subsequently streamed on Netflix). While Richards compares *Glitch* with the French production *Les Revenants* (Gobert 2012-2015), the conviction regarding the conjunction of eighteenth century-literature and Australian 1970s cinema is sourced in Rayner (2011) (Richards 4). Yet Rayner overlooks the colonial literary or art influences that Richards cites. Instead he argues for the inheritance of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel in Australian cinema in the 1970s by analyzing tropes in films described by Dermody and Jacka as 'Australian Gothic'. Richards is not wrong that Australian

screen inherits colonial literary conventions. But Dermody and Jacka do not reference their description to either literary bush melancholy, or the historical Gothic novel, nor any literary prototypes at all.

Dermody and Jacka highlight a specific group of films as exemplary of their idea of 'Australian Gothic'. Except for the observation that the 'best examples' are 'intuitive and bizarre mixtures of B-grade genres' their description is strikingly without reference to anything other than Australian films of the Revival (or the 'New Wave' as it was then termed). To point, they list more than 20 films from 1970 to 1987 beginning with J*ack and Jill: A Postscript* (Adams and Robinson 1970)*, Wake in Fright* (Kotcheff 1971) and *Holmesdale* (Weir 1971) (49). But they emphasise that the 'cycle really came to fruition in Jim Sharman's *Shirley Thompson versus the Aliens* [1972] and *The Night the Prowler* [sic] [1978]*'*, and 'it flourished' in Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974) and *The Plumber* (1979) (50). These are the films that repeatedly focus on the perverse '"normality"' of the small town or suburb with strong 'visual style ... enriched by fantasy art-design' and the 'skeptical and poetic' impulse, and 'dark inward comedy' that leads to the 'wry, knowing, surreal self-mockery' (Dermody and Jacka 51-52). There is some irony, then, given the latter day reputation of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* as exemplary Australian Gothic, that Dermody and Jacka exclude it. They say that the distinct quality of (their) 'Australian Gothic' was 'sadly lost from sight' in 'the more self-conscious mysticism of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*' (51)!

In turn, Rayner's (2011) discussion double-dips deeply into Dermody and Jacka's description *and* British Gothic literature *and* widens the comparison to American horror genres but wholly overlooks colonial Australian literature. While Dermody and Jacka do not reference their 'Australian Gothic' to any literary antecedents, Rayner (2011) purposefully aligns their

description with the 'thematic and critical terrain' of 'the canon of Gothic literature' (91-92). He sees the 'crucial characteristics' as 'variegated inception and execution of the Gothic'; its 'popular' frame of reference; its 'strong tendency, through hybridity and pastiche, towards exaggeration, comedy and parody'; and its 'abiding modernity … in its depiction of contemporary society' (91). Some motifs are seen as directly transposed, like the 'idyllic town in a sunlit rural setting' in *Wake in Fright* that equates to the 'cliché' of the literary Gothic's 'forbidding castle' where 'normalcy and seclusion hide deviancy and guilt' (93). This ancestry is reinforced through Burke's notion of the Sublime which Rayner detects in the high-speed drama of *Mad Max* (Miller 1979) and the gruesome wounds of the victims in *The Cars That Ate Paris* (96). The exception, as noted, is *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* termed 'purer' Gothic (92).

However, in his later essay, Rayner (2015) makes no reference to Dermody and Jacka or to the Gothic novel as templates for the evolving corpus of Australian Gothic films. Neither does Rayner mention *Picnic at Hanging Rock.* While *Walkabout* (Roeg 1971) and *Wake in Fright* remain prototypes of 'othering of the landscape'; and the 'anxiety-inducement of the remote outback town' – also exemplified in *The Cars that Ate Paris, Shame* (Jodrell 1988)*,* and *Incident at Raven's Gate* (De Heer 1988) (112) – there is no allusion to the clichéd motifs of the Gothic novel. While Rayner suggests that the false idyll is imported to urban settings in several Revival and twenty-first century films (112), he appears to shed faith in both the Gothic literary template and Dermody and Jacka's description. (Or perhaps these models were less relevant to the coverage of both Australia and New Zealand in that publication.)

More recently, the converging ancestries of literature and cinema are judiciously traced by Jane Stadler (2019). She expeditiously moves on from Dermody and Jacka's description of 'Australian Gothic', noting that the term gained currency only after their publication in 1988

(337). Stadler argues that Gothic landscapes resonate with specific works of colonial fiction and journalism in Australian films. For instance, the forests of Van Dieman's Land in Marcus Clarke's novel *For the Term of his Natural Life* return, Stadler argues, in films set in Tasmania. The deserts in the explorer journals of Charles Sturt and Edward Eyre resonate with outback spectacles where 'outsider[s]' experience an affect of estrangement (338-339). The figure of the 'lost child' in films from the 1970s and 1980s is traced to nineteenth-century bush fairy tales.[2] Stadler points to the 'roots' of these practices in British literature, namely *The Castle of Otranto* and 'Ann Radcliffe's romance novels' (336). But she refers to post-colonial narratives from a range of literatures in suggesting the diversity of influences, among them American and Maori. Australian Gothic, she argues, is a parodic aesthetic in cinema.

Stadler's move past Dermody and Jacka's definition seems advised given her interest in Gothic landscapes because landscapes are not a feature of their description in any case. Indeed, a question begs about the naming of their genre as 'Australian Gothic'. Perhaps this was no more than a quirk of description; had they called it 'Australian Grotesque' or 'Australian Pastiche', these films might not be debated now as 'Gothic'. Even though Rayner (2011) suggests how these films are continuous with historical Gothic, his later description (Rayner 2015), as noted, does not refer to this ancestry. Dermody and Jacka's description is therefore more than a fork in the road in discussion of Australian Gothic symbology.

The film on which some of this debate has recently converged is *The Babadook* (Kent 2014) which has attracted attention for its Gothic aesthetics. (Jennifer Kent's 2018 film, *The Nightingale,* will no doubt renew debate about Gothic aesthetics in her work). Balanzategui, within her wider argument about the reception of horror films in Australia, makes sound use of Dermody and Jacka's description in seeing *The Babadook* as 'a horror film with Australian

Gothic influences' (23-26). She also cites Rayner's description of 'Australian Gothic as an "Australianised" incarnation of European Gothic texts' (23). As Stephen Gaunson argues, Kent deliberately distances *The Babadook* from the cinematic landscape tradition. He extends Balanzategui's analysis in commenting on the haunting of Amelia (Essie Davis) as portrayed with reconfigured European tropes of the haunted house. While he identifies 'The Gothic in Australia' with film titles (356-357), Gaunson likens the monster (the Babadook) to a bunyip, and refers to bunyips in the colonial literary fictions of Rosa Praed and Marcus Clarke (Gaunson 363).

These various accounts all in some way situate the origins of Australian Gothic in British or European history with wider and colonial influences feeding into the contemporary aesthetics. The architectural features so characteristic of the eighteenth-century literary genre are mainly represented by the motifs of the haunted house and (substitutes for) Gothic castles. While Rayner's wide-ranging study of Gothic tropes in Australian films is fairly unrivalled for scope, Richards struggles to reconcile it with the colonial legacy of bush melancholy. In looking more closely at this bush melancholy tradition which stemmed from settlers' responses to the (perceived) menacing landscape, it is useful to consider that the menace partly arose from the deemed *lack* of antiquity in the place. This quality of antiquity is largely associated with architectural heritage.

Inheriting Bush Melancholy

In colonial Australia, Turcotte argues, Gothic substituted for the Romantic legacy and what was ineffably associated with 'Europe and its landscape' which could 'never be reproduced in the 'new' worlds since they lacked antiquity' (Turcotte 1998, 11). This perception, he notes,

did not only apply to the colony in Australia, and those absent antiquities were the built architectural forms. Turcotte cites examples of how this perceived lack was expressed in the earliest literature. He refers to Barron Field writing in 1823 of a '"land without antiquities"' (cited in Turcotte 11) and Frederick Sinnett's view of the 'inappropriate[ness]' of Romance to 'Australian letters' and the unlikeliness of '"a second 'Castle of Otranto"' to be borne here (12). What Australia was perceived to not possess, the antiquarian forms definitive of European Gothic, found substitute in its natural landscape.

The nineteenth-century Gothic figure par excellence is the bush, 'invariably a place of settler disorientation and death' (Gelder and Weaver 5). The term 'bush melancholy' is derived from Marcus Clarke's famous description of the 'fantastic land of monstrosities'; 'the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribblings of Nature learning how to write' (Clarke, Preface). The description, according to Ken Gelder and Rachel Weaver, 'hyperbolically transform[s] the Australian bush into a monstrous, occulted place' and 'spectralises the bush as the definitive setting for nightmare and terror' (4). Clarke himself, in the Preface, links 'Weird Melancholy' to the 'dominant note of Edgar Allen Poe's Poetry' (n.p.). The debate continues in literary scholarship: Peter Pierce suggests the implication was 'a country replete with possibilities for Romantic art' (42); while Daniel Hempel (2016) more recently terms this vein of writing 'grotesque'.

The works of Turcotte, and Gelder and Weaver (2007) have been influential in tracing Gothic tropes from Australian literature in cinema. But their commentaries discourage seeing the literary motifs as uniform. To take Richards' examples of Lawson and Baynton, for instance, the 'deadpan realism' of Lawson's 'The Bush Undertaker' (Gelder and Weaver 5) is quite unlike the expressionism of Baynton's stories of sexual threats and identity loss in the bush. Praed's Bunyip

– an amalgam of Indigenous and settler stories – is unrelated to creatures like Ernest Favenc's

Jinkarras (1894). Furthermore, echoes of American Gothic in titles that allude to or mimic works

by Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne or Washington Irving (the latter of 'Rip Van Winkle' fame)

suggest how some colonial Australian Gothic is a 'restaging' of European and American tropes

'even as it departs from them' in a 'unique and popular local genre' (Gelder and Weaver 2-3).

Turcotte (1998) argues that Gothic played a part in reversing views of Australia's colonial

inferiority, and that weird melancholy holds 'the possibility of transformation, of surviving the

colonial experience of dislocation' which 'acts as a driving hope' (11–14). It is therefore

potentially both abject and elevating.

The role of landscape is neither static nor wholly dominant in these imaginings.

Landscape is somewhat eclipsed among the '*late* colonial Gothic' that occurs '*after* the

accumulation of colonial wealth when properties are already well established' (Gelder and

Weaver 6, emphases in original). Exemplary are the 'desolate, ruined' homestead in Clarke's

1881 novella, *The Mystery of Major Molineux,* and the 'abandoned settler's hut' that is

'reclaimed ... by the wild' in Katharine Susannah Prichard's 1932 short story, 'The Curse'. These

architectural forms appear in narratives that look back to 'the moment of fully embodied

settlement' and empty it out (7). The built properties become the focus of haunted intrigue rather

than the landscape, although haunting emanates from it.

Meanwhile, Gothic Revival architecture proliferated and Turcotte briefly mentions it as a

sign of colonial 'maturity'. The style was part of a movement 'in art and architecture in all

England's colonial possessions' (Andrews 161) and comparable to Singapore, India, New

Zealand, Canada in the nineteenth century (xix). The essence, Andrews argues, of the

'Australian-ness of Australian Gothic' architecture is to be found less in the forms, materials and

details as in 'the *idea* that propelled the choice of the gothic for around a century' (141, my emphasis). I do not suggest any direct analogue with literary or film practices. But Andrews' account furnishes a sense of the abundant, normalized, and hegemonic image of Gothic in the design repertoire of colonial Australia. Paradoxically, this style that derived its aesthetic from medieval ruins came to mark colonial prosperity in a place presumed as yet unruined.

In contrast, in literature, the Gothic melancholy was equated with anxiety and displacement, albeit ambiguously. Yet a parodic sentiment pervades Australian film Gothic, according to Stadler. The historical Gothic that is the supposed genesis of these traditions was marked by exaggeration, fictionality and counterfeit. It seems that the sprawling term 'Gothic' signifies a range of propensities, or these traditions are more disparate than typically assumed. It raises a question about the continuing attraction to Gothic aesthetics in Australian film and television, and two recent productions offer a final reflection on the mystique of antiquity and ruins, in particular. In briefly discussing *Celeste* and the television remake of *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* attention is drawn to the architectural features that displace the dominance of the Gothic element of landscape. The parodic effect is in point with regard to the authentic settings of these productions in heritage properties, and how these affect or signify the motif of ruin.

The Folly and the College: Authentic Indexes of Fictionality

Celeste, an original screenplay by the director, Ben Hackworth, and the late Bille Brown, was apparently working titled '*The Ruins of Love*'.[3] Renamed for its heroine, her tragedy is set among the 'ruins' of Paronella Park, the decaying Italianate villa and long-term tourist attraction outside Innisfail in Far North Queensland. Built in the 1930s, Paronella Park was reputedly a tribute of love by the late eponymous owner to his wife. Its odd spectacle amidst the tropical

farmlands is its folly, an ornamental building that features in the film. Ostensibly Spanish or Italianate in design, it is dissonant from the European style repertoire in a hand-made way. Yet its role in *Celeste* is suggestive of the Gothic analogue of narrative and architecture in signifying the perversity of the resident desires.

The story concerns a former opera singer, Celeste (Radha Mitchell) who strives to revive her career after having abandoned it years earlier to be with her late husband in his rainforest mansion. She summons her estranged stepson (Thomas Cocquerel) to help prepare for the concert. He emerges from his tradesman's ute like a uniformed faun in the villa glades commissioned to build the stage for Celeste's performance and to earn the $6000 he owes to some gangsters. Throughout their quasi-incestuous relationship, he maintains the secret that the husband was unfaithful to Celeste. While her revival is a triumph, soon after, Celeste declares that she is terminally ill. She begs the stepson to assist her suicide and dispose of her in the lagoon where the husband drowned, apparently still innocent of his betrayal.

Celeste adopts several of the repeated motifs of Australian Gothic fictions: the uncanny landscape and small town, and the affect of displacement and estrangement. It is apparent in Celeste's ambivalence about her career, and her depressed affection for the late husband. In this she resembles one of the 'bush women battling ghosts' that recur in the Gothic theatres of northern Australia (according to Carleton 2012). The plot of family secrets, shades of incest, and the fictionality of identity – Celeste is willingly impersonated by her friend, Grace (Nadine Garner) in a wig disguise – are also reminiscent of the Gothic woman's film (see Doane 1987) and the Gothic novel from which the architectural novelty of the folly derives.

The languid exteriors feature close views of the folly and rainforest gardens and waterfall. The Euro-Gothic allusions are Asianised with processions of oriental parasols, garden

Buddhas and Anglo-Asian house staff. Intermittently, the stark window casings unmistakably mark the architecture of the main house and the village shop as planter Queensland. Aerial views of the Innisfail region, its cane fields and roads, traversed by the stepson, suggest earlier sinister plantation-scapes like the cane fields in *Radiance* (Perkins 1998). But without Indigenous characters *Celeste* does not so strongly reference the haunted history of dispossession. Indeed, publicity pieces appetized audiences for the tropical foil, and effused about the Paronella Park setting (Salins 2019; *Cinema Australia* 2019).

This reception implicitly overlooked the film, or suggested a lure to future film productions and tourism at the Park. But film critics were frank about the merits, one ranking it first among the 'bad' Australian films of 2019 (Brown 2019). Another termed it a 'misfire' in which the building and heroine seemed more 'wreck' than ruin (Byrnes 2019). More sympathetically, Rebecca Harkins-Cross (2019) sought to redeem the filmmaker, Hackworth. She describes him as a meta-storyteller who invokes the lurking cringe at the heart of the Australian culture, which is apparent, she says, in Celeste's false-flippant angst about her revival. While *Celeste* is certainly a 'B' film, it is perhaps less 'cringe' than the parodic fictionality at the heart of Gothic aesthetics that stirs in its meta-discourse.

With its gooey tropical trappings and un-haunting melodrama, *Celeste* is a stroke of parody. The grotesque featured building seems cause for little else. As a trysting place for the hippie diva and her stepson it insinuates discomfort. Gaudily, it frames the off-juxtaposition of the classical opera plot and the stepson's blue-collar tensions with contractors and crooks. When Celeste eventually sings her Schubert lieder, it is suggestive of authentic outdoor or bush-opera events. Except that Radha Mitchell lip-synchs, doll-like upon the folly stage, to the dubbed voice of the soprano, Celeste Lazarenko. The possibility that her triumph is the result of skillful lip-

synch is not part of the plot. But the authenticity of the over-hyped setting takes the parody beyond the text to the larger fictionality of filmmaking as an enterprise hooked in with tourism and hospitality in Queensland.

The release of *Celeste* roughly coincided with the television remake of that cinematic icon, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*. Primed for young adult entertainment in streamed media, the sense of Gothic fictionality pervades the remake and not least in its production in heritage locations. The remake returned to Mt Macedon, Victoria where Pat Lovell and Peter Weir's 1975 film was made and where both productions honour the setting of Joan Lindsay's (1967) novel. It is one of the more haunted of literary and cinematic interfaces because the setting for such a long time supplemented the novel's foil of recording true events. This foil is constructively disrupted in the remake through the introduction of Indigenous characters – Marion (Madeline Madden), Tom (Mark Coles-Smith) – and cultural awareness. Tracker Joe (Bruce R. Carter) comments within the fiction on the sacred country of the Rock.

This cultural sensitivity seems extended in the way the eeriness of the landscape becomes secondary to the haunted horror of the College in the remake. Commentary on the 1975 film has referred to the relationship between 'the two "monoliths"', the college and Hanging Rock (Wild 126). In basing the script of the remake more on the novel ('The Making' 2018), the college building is granted more central intrigue. The first episode opens with Mrs Appleyard (Natalie Dormer) inspecting the property in the company of a Bendigo real estate agent (Kim Gyngell), with a prefacing intertitle concerning the centrality of the 'mansion' in the mystery. This is in contrast with the ethereal Valentine's Day divertissement that begins Weir's film. New locations provide the interiors, namely Como House and Rippon Lea in Melbourne. Although neither of

these buildings nor the old film's college setting of Martindale Hall in Mintaro, South Australia, can be described as architecturally 'Gothic'. [4]

Rather than the cinematic bush melancholy of the 1975 film, the landscape mythos is evoked with Hitchcock-like trick montage and its spectacle is disrupted by the architectural feature of the college. Behind its genteel façade, the college becomes the scene of the abject pranks and abuses – the merciless caning of Miranda (Lily Sullivan), the victimization of Sara Waybourne (Inez Curro), the crucified possum and the Boer War soldier who, found defecating on the floor, is shot by Sara. In these moments, the college becomes a torture house and, like the folly in *Celeste,* obtains the possessed aura of a ruin in a Gothic novel. These buildings eclipse the landscape and anchor the legibility of historical Gothic aesthetics in the productions. Like the imaginary Gothic castles of the historical literature, the settings of *Celeste* and *Picnic at Hanging Rock* supplement the fictionality of the tales while the heritage setting references the historicity of the spaces of the fiction.

To this extent there is some resonance with Groom's description of Strawberry Hill, cited earlier. The retro, Asianised décor of the interiors in *Celeste* are comparably 'deliberately miscellaneous'. The colonial Victorian aura of Appleyard College, faithfully recreated, is nevertheless comparably 'pastiche', 'lavish' and 'concocted from various effects' and 'filled with *objects d'art'.* But the imprinted Gothic '"gloomth"' is not traceable to abbeys or cathedrals but to the dim interiors of planter homesteads of Queensland, and heritage trails in Victoria. If the aesthetics of these productions become legible with reference to literary, cinematic or architectural precedents, they are also false doors to the British/European origins of Gothic.

It could be said that these productions resonate with the Gothic novel, and this in a general sense would be true. But the parodic effects suggest how the legacy of the Gothic novel

can manifest without any direct heritage, and as an effect of artifice rather than tradition and the acquired mystique of antiquity and ruins. To privilege the landscape mythos over the built features could sustain a convincing connection to a cinematic landscape tradition. But to overlook the Gothic discourse of the buildings is to renew the 'lack' or strangeness attributed to landscape in colonial settlers' encounters. Recognition of the competing spectacle of land and buildings can inscribe new layers to the central core drama that resides in so much Australian Gothic imagery concerning notions of property and ownership; of possession and dispossession.

Conclusion: The Gothic Tale of Origin

The approach to these recent productions is to highlight intersections and dissonances with the dual literary and architectural histories of Gothic and colonial literature. It is premised, as I explain above, on the recent tendencies to overly condense the historical trajectories of Australian Gothic cinema or to impose them (as in Rayner's approach). Yet Gothic in Australia has a diverse provenance, as the various commentaries also suggest. The complicating event of Dermody and Jacka's naming of a genre of New-Wave films as 'Australian Gothic' is one that requires further consideration beyond this article. Not least, it questions how those appeals to the eighteenth-century sources of contemporary cinema suggest a desire for an ancestry so much longer than the relatively recent genesis represented by the cinema Revival of the 1970s.

Indeed, the Revival is itself a Gothic tale: the strange Rip van Winkle story of the industry that went to sleep for decades in the mid-twentieth century and revived under the influence of state and popular stimuli in a disturbed half dream of quest for national identity that has persisted over decades since. The Gothic properties of Australian cinema and its heritage offer scope to reflect more critically on this half-awake past, and especially as the Gothic 'myth' that reveals a troubled past among the ancestor(s). Any assumption that a popular literature

which couched its debatable truths in exaggerated fictions was transplanted and took root uncritically in the colonial outposts should be dispelled. If the 'Gothic novel' appealed to a paradoxical sense of longing in Britain, then its parody in the colonies may also bespeak a paradoxical desire – perhaps to unseat those inherited or implanted desires. Furthermore, the debate about Australian literature, as noted, continues. Bush melancholy may yet be seen as affirmative expression of what could not be reconciled with a sense of origin in Britain/Europe.

The sense in which Gothic is equated to ancestry and the juggling of domestic and transnational vocabularies of Gothic are ambiguities that speak to a continuing question about historical identity as it emerges in discussion of Australian cinema. Not only for this reason are the Gothic narratives created by Indigenous filmmakers vital to the discussion of Australian Gothic cinema. At the very least, these films disrupt the reverie of a cinema tradition nested in its pre-colonial roots and demand engagement with the complexities and ambivalences of the melancholic colonial iterations, and the diversity and decolonizing influences of its uses in contemporary multicultural Australia. The force of ancestry must be seen as generative rather than recessive in order to engage fully with the tropes of haunting in Australian Gothic cinema now, and in the Revival and its cognate cultural forms. It is in the interest of the future of filmmaking and its critical reception, and it pertains to the ongoing debate about Reconciliation. As the uncovering of dispossession and atrocities of the past continues, Australian cinema holds the promise that there is a lot more haunting still to be done.

Disclosure: There is no potential conflict of interest to report.

References

Adams, Phillip and Brian Robinson, dirs. 1970. *Jack and Jill: A Postscript.* Australia. Columbia/AFI.

Andrews, Brian. 2001. *Australian Gothic: The Gothic Revival in Australian Architecture from the 1840s to the 1950s.* Carlton South, Vic: Melbourne University Press.

Australian Cultural Fund (ACF). 2019. "Ruins of Love: Feature Film." Retrieved 23 July 2019. https://australianculturalfund.org.au/projects/ruins-of-love-feature-film/

Ayres, Tony and Louise Fox, Creators. 2015-2019. *Glitch.* Australia: Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) / Matchbox Pictures / Screen Australia.

Balanzategui, Jessica. 2017. "The Babadook and the Haunted Space Between High and Low Genres in the Australian Horror Tradition." *Studies in Australasian Cinema.* 11 (1): 18–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503175.2017.1308907.

Balmain, Colette. 2017. "East Asian Gothic: A Definition." *Palgrave Communications* 3 (3). https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-017-0038-8

Botting, Fred. 2000. "In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture." In *A Companion to the Gothic*, edited by David Punter, 3—14. Oxford: Blackwell.

Brown, David Morgan. 2019. "The Good and the Bad of Australian Drama in 2019: Acute Misfortune and Celeste." *High on Films* 21 June. Retrieved 24 March 2020. https://www.highonfilms.com/the-good-and-the-bad-of-australian-drama-in-2019-acute-misfortune-and-celeste/

Byrnes, Paul. 2019. "Celeste not the only wreck in this confusing tropical melodrama." *Sydney Morning Herald* April 26, 2019. Retrieved 23 July 2019. https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/celeste-not-the-only-wreck-in-this-confusing-tropical-melodrama-20190422-p51g6j.html

Carleton, Stephen. 2012. "Australian Gothic Theatre and the Northern Turn." *Australian Literary Studies.* 27(2): 51-67.

Cinema Australia. 2019. "5 things you need to know about *Celeste.*" https://cinemaaustralia.com.au/2019/04/21/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-celeste/ Retrieved 23 July 2019

Clery, E.J. 2002. "The Genesis of 'Gothic' Fiction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold Hogle, 21-39. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.

Clarke, Marcus. 2014-2016. Preface. In *Poems* by Adam Lindsay Gordon. 1893 edition. https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/g/gordon/adam_lindsay/poems/preface.html

De Heer, Rolf. 1988. *Incident at Raven's Gate.* Australia. FGH/International Film Management/ AFC.

Dermody, Susan and Elizabeth Jacka. 1988. *The Screening of Australia: Anatomy of a National Cinema.* Vol. 2. Sydney: Currency Press.

Doane, Mary Ann. 1987. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s.* Basingstoke, UK: MacMillans Press.

Favenc, Ernest. 1894. "The Haunt of the Jinkarras." In *Tales of the Austral Tropics.* London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co.

Gaunson, Stephen. 2019. "Spirits Do Come Back: Bunyips and the European Gothic in *The Babadook.*" In *A Companion to Australian Cinema*, edited by Felicity Collins, Jane Landman and Susan Bye, 355-369. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Gelder, Ken and Rachel Weaver, eds. 2007. *The Anthology of Australian Gothic Fiction.* Carleton: Melbourne UP.

Groom, Nick. 2014. Introduction. In *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* by Horace Walpole. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP.

Hackworth, Ben, dir. 2018. *Celeste.* Australia. Unicorn Films.

Harkins-Cross, Rebecca. 2019. "A fugitive dream: Ben Hackworth's *Celeste.*" Retrieved 23 July 2019. https://www.themonthly.com.au/blog/rebecca-harkins-cross/2019/30/2019/1556592014/fugitive-dream-ben-hackworth-s-celeste

Hawkes, Lesley Kathryn. 2011. "Fear, Voice, and the Environment in Sonya Hartnett's Forest and The Midnight Zoo." *Papers: Explorations in Children's Literature*. 21 (1): 67—76.

Hempel, Daniel. 2016. "'This Fantastic Land of Monstrosities': The Aesthetic of the Australian Grotesque In the Long Nineteenth Century." *Antipodes* 30 (2): 305-316.

Heritage Council of Victoria. N.d. https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/1076 Retrieved 11 October 2019.

Hogle, Jerrold E. 2002. "Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture." In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by J. Hogle. 1-20. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.

Hubner, Laura. 2018. *Fairy Tale and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film.* Palgrave MacMillan.

Jodrell, Steve. 1988. *Shame.* Australia. Barron Entertainment / UAA Films.

Kent, Jennifer. 2014. *The Babadook.* Australia/Canada. Screen Australia/ Causeway Films/ South Australian Film Corporation.

Kotcheff, Ted, dir. 1971. *Wake in Fright.* UK/Australia/USA. NLT Productions/ Group W.

Gobert, Fabrice, creator. 2012-2015. *Les Revenants.* France: Canal+.

"Martindale Hall Historic Museum." 2014. Retrieved 11 October 2019. http://www.martindalehall-mintaro.com.au/

Miller, George. 1979. *Mad Max.* Australia. Kennedy Miller Productions.

Ng, Andrew Hock Soon. 2008. Introduction. In *Asian Gothic: Essays on Literature, Film, Anime,* 1-15. Jefferson: McFarland & Co.

Punter, David. 2000. "Introduction." In *A Companion to the Gothic,* edited by Punter. Oxford: Blackwell.

Rayner, Jonathan. 2011. "Gothic Definitions: The New Australian 'Cinema of Horrors'." *Antipodes* 25 (1): 91—97.

_____. 2015. "Australian Gothic." In *Directory of World Cinema: Australia and New Zealand 2*, edited by Ben Goldsmith, Mark David Ryan and Geoff Lealand, 110—125. Bristol, UK: Intellect.

Richards, Stuart. 2018. "Reawakening in Yoorana: Glitch and the Australian Gothic Film." *New Review of Film and Television Studies,* doi: 10.1080/17400309.2018.1479182.

Rymer, Michael, Larysa Kondracki, and Amanda Brotchie, dirs. 2018. *Picnic at Hanging Rock.* TV Mini-Series. Australia: Amazon Studios/FremantleMedia/Screen Australia.

Salins, Christine. 2019. "Movie set in Paronella's crumbling ruins." April 20, 2019. Retrieved 23 July 2019. https://www.foodwinetravel.com.au/more/film/movie-celeste-set-in-paronella-park-queensland/

Sowerby, Robin. 2000. "The Goths in History and Pre-Gothic gothic." In *A Companion to the Gothic,* edited by David Punter, 15-26. Oxford: Blackwell.

Spooner, Catherine. 2017. *Post-Millenial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of the Happy Gothic*. Bloomsbury.

Stadler, Jane. 2019. "Atopian Landscapes: Gothic Tropes in Australian Cinema." In *A Companion to Australian Cinema*, edited by Felicity Collins, Jane Landman and Susan Bye, 336—354. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

"The Making of Picnic at Hanging Rock." 2018. In Rymer, Kondracki, Brotchie, dirs. DVD.

Townshend, Dale. 2019. *Gothic Antiquity: History, Romance and the Architectural Imagination, 1760-1840.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019.

Turcotte, Gerry. 1998. "Australian Gothic." In *The Handbook to Gothic Literature*, edited by Marie Mulvey-Roberts, 10—19. NY: New York UP.

____. 2009. "The Kangaroo Gargoyles: Footnotes to an Australian Gothic Script. In *Reading Down Under: Australian Literary studies,* edited by A. Sarwal and R. Sarwal, 352-363. New Delhi, India: SSS Publications.

Weir, Peter, dir. 1971. *Holmesdale.* Australia. Experimental Film and Television Fund.

____. 1975.*Picnic at Hanging Rock.*Sydney: Australian Film Commission / Picnic Productions.

____. 1977.*The Last Wave.* Sydney: Ayer Productions and Australian Film Commission.

Wild, Harriet. 2014. "Darling Miranda: Courtly Love in *Picnic at Hanging Rock.*" *Studies in Australasian Cinema* 8 (2-3): 123-132.

---

[1] Various writers cite the Marquis de Sade's view that the popularity of Gothic was an effect of the "revolutionary shocks in Europe" (see, for instance, Hogle 13).

[2] See Pierce (especially 60-64) who sees the fairy tales as secondary expressions of stories of lost children.

[3] See Australian Cultural Fund (ACF) website.

[4] 'Rippon Lea is 'French' influenced with 'Lombardic Romanesque details'; Como House is 'Australian Regency style with [Italianate] details' ('Heritage Council of Victoria', n.d.). Martindale Hall is 'Georgian styled ... Italianate influenced sandstone mansion' ('Martindale Hall' 2014).