

# In Search of an Australian Soul: Reflections on Religion and Spirituality in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *Japanese Story*

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The two films under review in this paper are *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and *Japanese Story* (2003).<sup>1</sup> Neither film is overtly religious, but I will argue that religion and spirituality are present in multiple forms at several levels, and are vital components of both films. Although very different, both films are distinctly Australian in their use of the land as iconic,<sup>2</sup> but are also universal in their overarching narratives of journey. Journeying is one of the most common themes in literature and film,<sup>3</sup> and is an oft used trope in religious traditions where pilgrimage is encouraged. Graham Turner suggests that earlier Australian films were concerned with creating an identity for white Australia.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that these recent films are concerned with presentations of identity in search of a (predominantly White) Australian soul. This search can be read as spiritual, and involves the characters on screen and the audience in the seats.

The journey in *Rabbit Proof Fence* is more than a symbolic trope. The film recounts the true story of three young *Aboriginal* girls – Molly, Gracie and Daisy – who are taken from their families under government policy of forced removal of mixed blood *Aboriginal* children in order to assimilate them into the white population and ‘breed out’<sup>5</sup> *Aboriginality* in future generations. The girls escape from the Moore River settlement to which they are sent, and they follow the rabbit proof fence across twelve hundred miles of desert and bush to return home to their land and their mothers. It is a simple but astounding tale that is told in narrative form, and it brought to the screen the experience of the Stolen Generation who entered white Australian consciousness in 1997 through the findings of the Royal Commission.<sup>6</sup> The film depicts two very different cultures, and I suggest that the religious practices and milieu of both are key constructs in the depiction of this story, as they are clearly demarcated in the *mis-en-scene* of the movie.<sup>7</sup>

The stage is set from the opening sequence. Whilst a female *Aboriginal* voice (the real Molly) describes the coming of the white settlers and their efforts to build a long fence, the camera tracks across the broad, unencumbered land with a low level aerial shot which then rises to the empty sky. When it descends back down to the land as if from the domain of the patriarchal sky god, we see the fence – a singular man-made structure – stretching across the vastness. The subjectivity remains with the female as we are introduced to the child Molly surveying the land. We follow her gaze around the locality, and then up to the sky as she responds to the sound of a bird call. It is no longer empty. We then come down and close to Molly as she is joined by her mother who crouches at her side to share her viewpoint. Her mother explains that this is the Spirit Bird, and assures her that “He will always look after you”. We know that this is an important piece of information, because the camera evidences relationship through the angles and the framing. The mother then leaves Molly to continue her contemplation of the bird with whom a mystical relationship is now acknowledged. Molly is

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Noyce: *Rabbit Proof Fence*, Miramax Films, 2002; Sue Brooks: *Japanese Story*, Samuel Goldwyn Films, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Felicity Collins: ‘Bringing the Ancestors Home’ in Deb Verhoeven (ed.), *Twin Peeks: Australian and New Zealand Feature Films*, Damned Publishing, Melbourne, 1999, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Grace: ‘Rabbit-Proof Fence: The Journey of Feeling,’ *Australian Screen Education*, 36, 2004, 143.

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Turner: ‘Whatever Happened to National Identity? Film and the Nation in the 1990s,’ *Metro Magazine*, 100:32-33, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase is used by A.O. Neville in the film to explain the eugenic approach. Historical documentation attests to his belief in the validity of this process as noted by Collins and Davis in *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, 138.

<sup>6</sup> The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissions National Inquiry report – *Bringing Them Home (BTH)* – was tabled in Parliament on May 26, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to the following texts for insight into the technical aspects of film creation: John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.): *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000; and Stuart Cunningham: ‘Hollywood Genres, Australian Movies,’ in Albert Moran and Tom O’Regan (eds.), *An Australian Film Reader*, Sydney, Currency Press, 1986.

firmly situated in relationship with her mother, the Land, and the Bird. The following scene of a hunting expedition by the female family members reinforces this grounding, and the strong pairing of the feminine with nature and connectedness that is manifest throughout the film.

Our first introduction to a male character is a tracking shot upwards from the boot and rifle of Constable Riggs to his upper torso which shows that he is seated on a horse. The camera remains in a subordinate position, looking up at him in recognition of his authority. He is hidden behind a bush, maintaining covert surveillance of the family scene as his companion identifies the girls. When he rides out from behind the bush, his formal navy jacket is an intrusion into the natural colours and warm tones experienced thus far. This contrast of colour is heightened as the film cuts to an urban streetscape in Perth. The style is that of a Victorian postcard: the buildings are monochromatic, but the sky and the outfit of a woman that is foregrounded have been intentionally and artificially coloured. Church bells are ringing. The effect is to locate this society within linear time against the timelessness of the preceding scenes. Compared to the naturalistic scenes of Aboriginal life, treatment of Mr Neville – as the archetypal western character – is consistently constrained through *mis-en-scene* of wardrobe, situation, framing, colour, and angle. Thus from the opening scenes we are presented with a clear dichotomy, which opposes female Aboriginal naturalism to masculine Christian power.

Whilst Mr Neville is presented as a rational positivist, he is also the representative of the Christian establishment that supported and enabled not only the colonisation of Australia, but also the policy of removal. As Gary Simmons notes, “The right to marry and work was controlled, and in the name of Christianising children they were distanced from families and housed in dormitories.”<sup>8</sup> The role of the church is underlined by the centrality of the church building at the Moore River Settlement. That Mr Neville is perceived as a representative of Christianity is evidenced in his renaming as ‘Mr Devil’ by Molly’s mother and others in the film. Feminist theologians since the 1960s have been exposing the patriarchal nature of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Within a binary coding of the world, women embody the opposite to all that is considered valuable and virtuous in a man; therefore they are perceived as emotional, weak, and limited, rather than rational, strong and potentially limitless.<sup>10</sup> Annette Hamilton suggests that a similar process of negative imaging was projected onto the Aboriginal population and their ‘primitive’ religion.<sup>11</sup> What is interesting in *Rabbit Proof Fence* is the filmic treatment of the opposing religious typologies.

Mr Neville is given the opportunity through dialogue to demonstrate that he truly believed in the righteousness of his position, as we see in his explanation to the worthy (Christian) women in the lecture theatre. He also appears to care about his legal charges, and have intimate knowledge of each one – who had new shoes, and when - despite the size of territory under his Protectorate. This provides an argument for an even handed approach to the representation of an historical era. But the filmic dichotomy noted above privileges the naturalistic over the formalistic. Our sympathies are directed not only towards the girls themselves, but also towards the culture that they represent. We share in the perspective of the girls that see Mr Neville and his attendant culture as dominating and alien. For example, the initial introduction to Mr Nevil on screen is an upshot to his face from the level of his desk. Similar to the introduction the constable Riggs, Neville is always superior to the camera position. This is exacerbated in the scene at the Moore River settlement when Molly is inspected by Neville. The camera takes the subjective position of the girl, and we look up at Neville who is bending forwards and filling the visual field. Coupled with a sound track that distorts and distances his voice, we are positioned with Molly not only physically, but also emotionally. It is not only Neville that is distanced, but also the Moore River Settlement itself. It is always viewed from the far end of the compound, using a low camera angle in which the church is positioned centrally and appears to be on the top of an incline. The primary representations of Christianity are seen as alienating.

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<sup>8</sup> Gary Simmons: ‘The Other Side of the Rabbit-Proof Fence,’ *Australian Screen Education* 32, 2003, 47.

<sup>9</sup> See Gayle Graham Yates: ‘Spirituality and the American Feminist Experience,’ *Signs* 9(1), 1983, 59-72, for an introduction to this topic.

<sup>10</sup> Penelope Deutscher: “‘The Only Diabolical Thing About Women...’: Luce Irigaray on Divinity,’ *Hypatia* 9(4), 1994, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Annette Hamilton: ‘Fear and Desire: Aborigines, Asians and the National Imaginary,’ *Australian Perceptions of Asia: Australian Cultural History* 19, 1990, 14-35.

This contrast between the religious paradigms is again figured when Molly hears the thunder and sees the clouds whilst the bells are calling all to church. She responds to the call of the bush, and runs from the settlement through bush land that is alive with the sounds of life. This contrasts with the absence of natural sound effects when the camera cuts back to the settlement. Throughout the film, Christianity is constructed as rigid and brittle, and totally at odds with the natural environment. I would suggest that it also intimates a rigid, brittle constraint of its own followers. This contrasts with the liberating experience of the Aboriginal religious practice that seems to guide the girls on their journey.

When Molly, Gracie and Daisy reach the fence and grasp hold, the camera cuts to the mother and grandmother also holding the fence. This technique suggests a mystical connection across the miles. As they get closer to home, the imaging takes on an almost shamanistic tinge. The heat shimmer in the desert surrounds Molly and Daisy, swallowing them up and integrating them into a land beyond our reach. One commentator suggests that waking, seeing the Spirit Bird, and then recognising the landscape perhaps implies that a Dreaming Track exists where the fence has failed.<sup>12</sup> The sense of mystery and otherness is heightened as the women engage in 'women's business', apparently seeking to guide and support the girls through the ether. It is a realm of consciousness and power that is totally alien and unsettling for Constable Riggs, who comes across the two women in the bush. It is the stuff of nightmares, with long shadows and eerie sounds that send him scuttling back to camp. Aboriginal religious practice is seen to be endowed with a spiritual power that emphasises the sepulchral emptiness of institutionalised Christianity.

*Rabbit Proof Fence* is an emotive film. It is a site of contentious discourse in the history wars that surround the very public angst of facing the unpalatable truth about white settlement.<sup>13</sup> But it can also be seen as an interesting commentary on the religious sensibility of some sections of modern white Australia. The portrayal of Christianity is most unappealing, although there is no reason to assume that Christian adherents in the 1930s felt that way about their faith: it is a modern projection. In contrast, Aboriginal spirituality, as manifest in the film, is valorised. The film positions a white audience in limbo between institutionalised religion presented as outdated and ill-fitting, and an indigenous religion of land and relationship that we can intuit, admire and perhaps desire, but cannot access.

*Japanese Story* demonstrates the reality of modern living in a spiritual void. It tells the tale of Australian geologist Sandy Edwards, who is charged with meeting Japanese businessman, Tachibana Hiromitsu (Hiro) in the West Australian outback in order to sell him some software. He misunderstands her role, and takes her to be a driver. Initially antagonistic, their relationship develops over the few days they spend together. They become lovers, and then Hiro dies – quite unexpectedly – by diving into a water hole and breaking his neck. The final third of the movie charts Sandy's return to civilisation with his dead body, and the process of grief that attends his repatriation to his wife, family, and country. The overarching motif is again one of journey: into the desert, but also into the soul. As with *Rabbit Proof Fence*, the Australian landscape is a major feature, as it has always been within the Australian imaginary.<sup>14</sup> David Tacey suggests that "In Australia, landscape carries our experience of the sacred other"<sup>15</sup> because "In Australian cultural experience the landscape is coterminous with

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<sup>12</sup> Garry Gillard: 'Signs, Lines, Tracks and Trails: 'Rabbit-Proof Fence,'" *Australian Screen Education* 40, 2005, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, *op.cit.* 135-136.

<sup>14</sup> Barrie McMahon & Robyn Quin: *Australian Images* Science Press, Marrickville NSW 1990 p31

<sup>15</sup> David J Tacey: *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*, Harper Collins, Melbourne, 1995, 8. Tacey undertakes a wide-ranging exploration of art, literature and Jungian psychology to argue that modern Euro-Australian culture is searching for a soul – a spirituality of its own. For Euro-Australians who are adrift from the religious moorings of earlier European generations, this involves recognition of the spiritual content of the land, rather than the continual portrayal of it as "either paradisaical or demonic" for white settlers. Tacey sees the current re-negotiation of national identity following the 1992 Mabo decision as an opportunity to develop spiritual depth and connection that neither denigrates nor appropriates Aboriginal Dreaming.

the unconscious: it is vast, ancient, mythological and wholly other".<sup>16</sup> Sue Brooks, the director, seems to engage with this idea when she says that:

A really popular story in Australia is that people go into the desert and something happens to change their lives. A lot of films do it, maybe because Australians have profound emotional connections with the desert.<sup>17</sup>

Curiously, it is actually Hiro that manifests a connection with the desert in *Japanese Story* rather than Sandy. But this is a film that delights in subverting myths.<sup>18</sup> Whilst there is one physical journey undertaken, there are two separate spiritual journeys, which intersect and intertwine for a short period. Hiro comes seeking, and appears to find his grail immediately before his death. Sandy's journey is foisted upon her: uninvited, unintentional, but spiritual nevertheless.

Obviously, Hiromitsu is Japanese. Beyond this we know very little about him: his life exists beyond Australia – beyond the frame. Consequently, we create a biography and characterisation based on clues and hazy knowledge of Japan. Robert Smith argues that Confucianism is the underpinning morality and function behind the modern Japanese family even when not acknowledged as such.<sup>19</sup> This accords with the little we glean of Hiro's family: we know that he works for his father, who must not be told the truth of Hiro's random wanderings; and we see Hiro's wife as a picture of dignity and decorum in public, who cannot grieve until she is alone in the car. We therefore locate him in a life that is over-regulated in a country that is over-crowded. He comes to Australia to experience space, and perhaps to seek himself in the Jungian sense of individuation "as a pathway between the psychic opposites, between the demands of the primal unconscious and the duties and claims of consciousness".<sup>20</sup>

Sandy, on the other hand, is a product of western individualism. We see her life as single, workaholic, slovenly, and lacking in intimacy: the classic portrayal of white masculinity.<sup>21</sup> Despite her obvious friendship with Jane and Baird, and her frequent visits to her mother, she remains disconnected from any sense of community or place, and apparently lacking in depth. As Hiro finds lightness in the desert, Sandy finds depth. We are given a yardstick for Sandy in the bracketing scenes with her mother. At the start of the film, we see them in the kitchen, where Mother is pasting obituary notices into her scrapbook. Sandy accuses her of being morbid, to which she replies that death is a part of life, and that Sandy refuses to engage with that fact. Towards the end of the film, this scene is reprised when Sandy hands over an obituary of her own for inclusion in the book of life.

The drama of discovery, life and death is played out against the background of the Pilbara landscape. Hiro responds with awe, not just to the landscape, but also to the sheer size of the mining operation being undertaken. His view is imbued with a religious sensitivity that leads him to meditate beside the sea, compare the mine to a Mayan temple, and sit before an Aboriginal rock painting in reverence and respect. Sandy, on the other hand, evinces little interest in the mine, and little in the desert. She presents an Australian persona that is beyond the early settler response of 'paradise or hell'. She has technical knowledge of the land through her work. She is also aware of how to live with the dangers that it poses. But she is not engaged with it. It takes a foreigner to open her eyes.

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<sup>16</sup> *Loccit.*

<sup>17</sup> Rose Capp: 'Romancing The Stone: Outback Adventures of a Different Kind in *Japanese Story*,' *Metro Magazine* 138, 2003, 28.

<sup>18</sup> See Jane O'Sullivan: 'Geologist or Geisha? Disorienting Body and Landscape in *Japanese Story*,' *Antipodes*, December 2004, 140-146, for a fascinating queer analysis of the film and the multiple subversions within it.

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Smith: 'The Japanese (Confucian) Family,' in Tu Wei-Ming (ed.), *Confucian Traditions in East Asian Modernity: Moral Education and Economic Culture in Japan and the four Mini-Dragons*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Tacey, *op.cit.*, 86.

<sup>21</sup> O'Sullivan, *op.cit.*, 142; McMahon & Quin, *op.cit.*, 69.

The pivotal point in their relationship comes when they share a confrontation with death in the desert. On return to safe territory they engage in a life-affirming sexual union that “has a touching solemnity – the feeling of a ritual”.<sup>22</sup> The music which accompanies their love-making is a beautiful blend of a Japanese melody over a western chord progression. The sexual union heralds a period of opening to each other, and to the environment in which they travel. The change in Hiro is marked by a change of clothes – from the formal suit that he has worn throughout, to shorts and tee-shirt more suited to the environment. Sandy opens her heart not only to Hiro, but also to the land. She starts to see as he sees, which is depicted in action as she moves to his side to share his gaze, and she pockets the stone that speaks to him of age. Vineberg notes that this centrepiece section, “is worked out almost entirely in visual and emotional terms.”<sup>23</sup> Montage gives way to shot.<sup>24</sup> The lack of dialogue draws the audience into the sacred space that has been created. Hiro speaks: “Here, in the desert, you have shown me something beautiful”. It is sacred, and it is fragile, for in the next scene he dies.

The remainder of the film concentrates on Sandy’s return to urban civilisation, and her struggle to comprehend and integrate the loss of Hiro. In the hours before Baird and the protocols of death arrive, Sandy engages with death through ritual: she carefully washes and dresses his body, and she then keeps vigil outside the refrigerator: acts which are clearly recognisable in many religious traditions.<sup>25</sup> But Sandy has no religious tradition or community to support her during the grieving process, and her grief is unrecognised by those close to her. She copes by creating her own rituals; planting a Japanese garden to house the stone, and giving the obituary to her mother.<sup>26</sup> Through the experience she comes to recognise her interconnectedness and responsibility to others manifest through her interactions with Hiro’s wife.

Capp argues that the film should have been called “Australian Story” because the ultimate focus is on Sandy’s story,<sup>27</sup> who is an identifiable Australian character. The name *is* a misnomer, because the film is not only focuses on Sandy, but is rooted in the Australian psyche. By relying on Australian mythology of Asia to inform our understanding of Hiro’s character and motivations, the Australian viewer positions him as an ‘other’ against which we see ourselves. Hiro’s religious sensitivity contrasts with Sandy’s apparent disconnection, as Aboriginal spirituality is contrasted with Christian formalism in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Both of the movies discussed are multi-faceted, and utilise many classic tropes of Australian culture. They can be read from many perspectives – political, cultural, queer, feminist – but in the limited space available I have attempted to show that they also invite the viewing public to consider the nature of sacred experience and religious practice, and by so doing, engage in the search for a modern Australian soul.

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<sup>22</sup> Steve Vineberg: ‘Cultural exchange: Japanese Story Movie Review,’ *The Christian Century*, 121(5), 2004, 48.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The difference between montage and shot as filmic technique is explained in Hill and Church Gibson, *op. cit.*, 14-15.

<sup>25</sup> As demonstrated in S.M. O’Gorman: ‘Death and Dying in Contemporary Society: An Evaluation of Current Attitudes and the Rituals Associated with Death and Dying and their Relevance to Recent Understandings of Health and Healing,’ *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 27, 1998, 1127-1135.

<sup>26</sup> See Ward H Goodenough: ‘Self Maintenance as a Religious Concern,’ *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 23(2), 1988, 117-128, for a discussion of the role of ritual in grief.

<sup>27</sup> Capp, *op. cit.*