

Wake in Fright (1971): A nightmare vision of the Australian outback

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Fifty years ago, the early 1970s saw a wave of realistic and socially critical films, emerging alongside a global upsurge of class struggle and political unrest opened up by the 1968 French general strike. Earlier this year, the *World Socialist Web Site* published a series of reviews on some of these films.

This process, connected to the break-up of the postwar boom, was also felt in Australia. The 1971 release of *Wake in Fright*, a disturbing portrait of life in the Australian outback, expressed the growing radicalism and rebellion among local artists and youth against the country's restrictive cultural atmosphere. The movie, an early product of the newly revived national film industry, helped pave the way for the Australian New Wave.

The rebirth of the film industry, all but dead since the 1920s, was deeply linked to a growing eruption of the Australian working class against two decades of conservative Liberal Party rule. That mass movement also brought Gough Whitlam into power in 1972, whose Labor government raised funding for film production, although it had begun a year before he came into office. Around 120 films were made between 1970 and 1979, a major increase from the 17 made in the 1960s.

Cultural life in Australia in the 1950s and 60s was insular and stifling. Strict censorship of film, television and literature was practiced until the early 1970s. The country's racist immigration policy, White Australia, remained in place until 1966, following the resignation of Australian prime minister and Liberal Party leader Robert Menzies. "Outside" cultural influences were regarded with official scorn and suspicion.

The plan to adapt Kenneth Cook's 1961 novel *Wake in Fright* for the screen began with the remarkable American filmmaker Joseph Losey. Exiled in Britain to escape the US anti-communist blacklist, Losey got the project underway in 1963 with actor Dirk Bogarde. It fell through, and the rights were eventually sold to an Australian television production company. Canadian director Ted Kotcheff was called in to direct.

Kotcheff, who was working in London, had come from directing *Life at the Top* (1965) and *Two Gentlemen Sharing* (1969), two astute films dealing with class divisions in postwar Britain. In Hollywood later on, he made the mischievous, anti-establishment *Fun with Dick and Jane* (1977, with George Segal and Jane Fonda). Kotcheff also was a pioneering figure in Canadian film production. He is still alive at 93.

Wake in Fright tells the story of John Grant (Gary Bond), the young teacher of a one-room schoolhouse in the remote desert

hamlet of Tiboonda. Under a \$1,000 contract, as a "bonded slave," he is forced to teach for two years at a location of the Education Department's choosing.

The film's uncomfortable sense of isolation is there in the very opening shot: a panoramic view of the two-shack outpost, and a railway platform with a clock without hands, in the middle of a vast red desert. Grant plans to escape for a Sydney vacation where his girlfriend lives, as the school year ends.

He travels to the nearby mining town of Bundanyabba, known to locals as the Yabba, where he will spend the night before flying to Sydney. At the town pub, officially closed but crowded with miners, he meets police chief Jock Crawford (menacingly played by Chips Rafferty). Crawford compels Grant to drink several rounds of beer before heading to the Returned and Services League (RSL) club.

There, Grant observes a startling scene when the radio announces a moment's silence for Australian war casualties, the Anzacs. The club's furious drinking and slot-machine gambling halt abruptly. All stand to attention and chant, "We will remember them, lest we forget." The scene, lit by ominous red light, has the air of a demonic ritual.

Crawford introduces Grant to the illegal game of two-up, where bets are placed on a toss of two coins. Some of the miners, Crawford says, bet their weekly pay packets on the game. The gambling scenes and their mad rush of shouting miners under the blinding lamps, like something out of a Dostoevsky novel, are among the film's unforgettable moments.

In a sudden impulse to raise the money for his \$1,000 bond, Grant bets his entire earnings on the game, loses, and finds himself stranded in the Yabba for the weekend. The rapid descent begins.

Grant meets another local character at the two-up, the alcoholic nihilist Doc Tydon (Donald Pleasence in a brilliant performance). Grant is repulsed by the ignorance and "aggressive hospitality" of the Yabba locals. Doc memorably responds: "It's death to farm out here. It's worse than death in the mines. You want them to sing opera as well?"

Doc's bleak fatalism is in many ways the guiding spirit of the film. Led on by Doc, Grant plunges into a nightmarish drinking binge, in the company of Tim Hynes (Al Thomas) and hooligans Dick (Jack Thompson, in his first feature) and Joe (Peter Whittle).

Grant is pulled into a hurried sexual liaison in the dust with Hynes' daughter (Sylvia Kay), interrupted by his vomiting, both out of disgust and drunkenness. He is whisked off to a kangaroo

shooting spree in which he participates, by turns willingly and reluctantly. He is forced to prove his manliness by wrestling a kangaroo and cutting its throat. The bloody spectacle culminates in a drunken homosexual encounter with Tydon.

Bewildered by the turn of events, Grant makes a desperate attempt to hitchhike to Sydney. The confused driver brings him right back to the Yabba. Seemingly unable to escape, Grant contemplates murder and suicide.

Over a half-century since its release, *Wake in Fright* remains a powerful and shocking picture of outback life. The striking photography by Brian West, together with John Scott's eerie score, capture well the maddening, oppressive heat. Not only did the film set a new standard for the burgeoning industry, it remains a serious artistic effort in its own right.

Frequently hailed as a masterpiece by today's critics, the film certainly has its shortcomings, which are not merely those of the filmmakers but are bound up with broader artistic and political problems of the early 1970s.

Doc Tydon's dark worldview, which is never challenged, dominates the film. In one scene, sitting on the veranda with a semi-conscious Grant, as Dick and Joe brawl in the background, Doc laughs at the notion of "perfectibility" and "progress," calling it "a vanity spawned by fear." He sees himself as one who is truly free because he embraces the animalistic desires beneath the thin veneer of "civilisation." He considers the Yabba's workers satisfied with their degraded behaviour: "All the little devils are proud of hell."

In this light, Grant's slide into the general degradation becomes, in somewhat existentialist fashion, proof of the "heart of darkness" inside every human being, powerless to resist subconscious urges and capable of retrogression to barbarism. One night is enough to turn the refined Grant into a beer-drinking savage.

Such conceptions were highly popular at the time among artists and intellectuals, influenced by a host of postwar "left" philosophical trends (Frankfurt School, existentialism and others), that ordinary working people are complicit in their own oppression under capitalism. The film largely depicts the Yabba miners in a monotonous, one-sided manner. Director Kotcheff supposedly planned scenes, axed due to a limited budget, showing Dick and Joe in the mines, to explain their heavy drinking and fighting as a release from the backbreaking work. The film is weaker for this omission.

Through no fault of the filmmakers themselves, these weaker aspects were later taken up and developed into a genre of sensational ultraviolence, from the *Mad Max* films (1979–2024) to *Wolf Creek* (2005), presenting Australia as a universally barbaric horror show.

What distinguishes the film, however, is its realistic portrayal of Australian backwardness and its critical attitude towards it. The film's targets—"mateship," chauvinism, self-destructive drinking, parochialism and general mindlessness—are promoted to this day as "Aussie values" by the political establishment and mainstream media. It pierced a number of Australian myths, built up over the postwar era.

The Anzac "moment of silence" scene was a sharp rebuke to the official worship of militarism and patriotism. When the film was

released, young people were being radicalised by compulsory conscription and the brutality of the Vietnam War. The scene resonates all the more today, given that Anzac Day and the glorification of the military are even stronger now than in the 1960s.

The film also offered unusual glimpses of the harsh reality for Aboriginal Australians: the young wife of an abusive publican; an old man sitting alone on a train, ostracised from a group of singing travellers, but quietly singing along with them.

It was these qualities, one can surmise, that influenced a young generation of local filmmakers to closely examine Australia's historical and social reality. Years later, Kotcheff was apparently told by directors Peter Weir and Fred Schepisi that *Wake in Fright* "showed them the way." Weir and Schepisi would go on to make some of the most significant films of the Australian New Wave, including *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), *The Devil's Playground* (1976) and *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978). All of these works, in one way or another, hinted at a reality different from the so-called "national identity."

Serious feature films began appearing during the 1970s dealing with the class struggle, the plight of Aboriginal people and other subjects not previously broached. Some of the films worth seeing include *Walkabout* (1971), *Sunday Too Far Away* (1975), *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976), *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977), *Newsfront* (1978) and *My Brilliant Career* (1979).

Wake in Fright's searing honesty, however, is also thought to be the source of its commercial failure at the Australian box office. (The film was pulled from cinemas after just two weeks.) Melbourne film critic Colin Bennett sought to explain this at the time: "One way or another Australians stand condemned... We will knock everything about Australia but ourselves and we will shun those who paint our faults larger than life."

While many local critics were outraged by the movie's realism, viewed as an "attack" on Australia, it found success in France where it screened in cinemas for nine months straight and was nominated for Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival.

The film's mixed contemporary reception may have impacted the fate of its original negative, which went missing for several decades. The last remaining print, degraded from neglect, was finally rediscovered and restored in 2009. It received a further 4K restoration this year.

Fifty years on, the film's imagery fully retains its power to disturb. It stands as a sharp condemnation of cultural backwardness in all its forms and deserves the widest possible audience today.



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